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SPRING 1993 • NUMBER 596



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AMAZING STORIES



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This Amazing Universe,
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From the Editor

Stories I'll Never Buy

THIS MAGAZINE doesn't blaze a narrow path. We publish lots of different types of science fiction, and occasional stories that might not be classifiable as genre stories, unless you resort to the catch-all terms "fantasy" and "speculative fiction." I'm convinced that *AMAZING Stories* is the most eclectic magazine publishing science fiction today.

Still, I can think of quite a few kinds of stories I wouldn't print even if you held a gun to my head. (And that's no way to get a story published in the first place, now is it?)

For as long as my name is in the masthead, or until I change my mind—which, of course, is an editor's prerogative—I can guarantee that within these pages you won't see:

Any story featuring a male character and a female character who are revealed to be (gasp) Adam and Eve. That idea's been around almost as long as the individuals it's based on, and any knowledgeable reader can see the ending coming from a mile away.

Stories that deal with (a) the Confederacy, (b) Hitler, or (c) a dashing knight winning (a) the War Between the States, (b) World War II, or (c) the heart of a fair maiden. All of these ideas are worn out and have been explored from, so it seems, every conceivable angle. If you want to write an alternate history, pick something a little less obvious. Make that a *lot* less obvious. If you want to write a heroic fantasy (or sword-and-sorcery fiction, or medieval magic realism, or whatever you want to call it) that differs in no major respect from any other story of the same type that's already been published, send it to a magazine that specializes in that sort of thing.

A story that turns out to have been a dream. To be memorable and enjoyable, a story has to be believable and sensible. A dream—when it comprises the entire story—makes for a lousy story because most dreams (the outlandish ones, anyway) are neither sensible nor believable... and any story about a boring dream is going to be a boring story, even if it does make sense.

Stories about sports written by people who don't know the rules, the strategy, or the jargon of the sport in question. I used to be a sports writer, I've always been a sports fan, and I like the idea of publishing science fiction about sports. But I'm super-sensitive to any lack of knowledgeability or authenticity in a sports story. If the sport-specific details in the story aren't right, it's virtually impossible for the story to be plausible.

Any combat story told from the first-person point of view. One of the things that keeps me reading a combat story (when I read one at all) is not knowing whether the main character is going to survive. If the main character is the one telling the story, it's pretty clear right from the start that he or she lived to fight again; otherwise, how could the story exist?

And most *verboten* of all, a story about what it's like to be the editor of a magazine. Here's a case where the truth of the job is much stranger than any work of fiction could ever be. Trust me.

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Dispatches

Stocking Stuffer

The story got me thinking about what people might do if indeed they had the power to change the past...

Christmas Gift a Keeper

Dear Editor,

I recently received a subscription to your magazine as a Christmas stocking stuffer. I read it during a recent plane trip and enjoyed it very much—especially two of the stories.

"State of Disorder" was gripping. The story got me thinking about what people might do if indeed they had the power to change the past, and how differently all of our lives may turn out depending on the paths resulting from a few seminal events. Hmmmm...

The other story that really struck a chord with me was "Cost of Doing Business," about the "surrogate victim." She was creepy—especially before I knew why she was in "the business." One thing that stuck with me was the fact that she could change more than some of her older, less attractive, male counterparts—how even when some slimeball is in a tight spot and looking for a way to save his sorry carcass, he can still activate that small(?) part of his brain that wants to get some pleasure while he's at it. That's even more creepy than the victim herself.

Anyway, after reading the Winter issue, I am anxious to see more!

SAARAH SCHNEIDER
Milwaukee WI

Licensed Fiction Gets a Thumb Up

Dear Mr. Mohan,

I think you are doing a terrific job with this latest version of the oldest SF magazine. I think that including licensed fiction is a terrific idea. In fact, is there any chance that we will be seeing *Star Wars* in *AMAZING* anytime soon? What licenses have you already secured?

The main reason I wanted to write was to congratulate Jack Williamson on the 70th anniversary of his first story. I would say that perhaps you should have reprinted "The Metal Man," but since my bookshelves already contain *The Early Williamson* and *The Best of Jack Williamson*, I will forgive you. Especially since you

printed the cover for the issue it appeared in. The appreciations by Pamela Mohan and Frederik Pohl were a nice touch. I also liked the photographs, even if they were the same ones in *Wonder's Child*.

Keep up the good work.

600

AMY S. FARMER
Charleston SC

WE THINK the licensed fiction is an exciting element of the magazine, too. Look for original *Babylon 5* stories to appear in coming issues, as well as more *Star Trek: The Next Generation* and *Star Trek: Voyager* fiction. We're working on a couple of other ideas, too. Keep watching these pages!—KM

A Charming Little Tole

Dear Kim,

I've just finished George Zebrowski's "Shrinkers & Movers"—a charming little tale, with some very clever yet unobtrusive touches, like the incorruptible tape measure, the Elsetto cuckoo, trees on fast grow, etc. This is a rarity in science fiction—a successful story with a moral: Get a cut and don't sweat the small stuff!

CHARLES HARNESSE
Clarksville MD

Coffee Table Coaster

Dear Kim,

My best friend has always had a fascination with science fiction that I have never understood. So, when she gave me a subscription to *AMAZING Stories* as a Christmas gift, I figured that it would make a nice, big coaster for my coffee table. A blizzard in early January found me snowed in and fresh out of reading material, so I took the plunge and opened the magazine. I must admit I was downright entertained! I certainly never expected to laugh, but "I Married the Stalker from Space" and the "Dr. Science" column actually caused me to chuckle. The issue is now too dog-eared to serve as a coaster. I'm looking forward to future editions.

JULIE BUNCZAK
Winslow MT

Harmful to Her Health?

Dear Editor,

Your Winter issue left me with some serious health problems. I laughed so hard when I read "I Married the Stalker from Space" that I think I might have ruptured something internally. No matter. It was worth it.

S. N. Dyer's story was packed with a laugh a minute and I don't remember the last time I read anything quite this satisfying. Any chance we will be seeing more of this author in future issues? I sure hope so.

The tribute to Jack Williamson, who I knew little about (sad but true) before your wonderful stories and his fun new piece, was not only entertaining but enlightening.

KAREN REITER
Daytona Beach FL



➔ "Dispatches" is the department where we print letters you send us. Tell us what you think of the magazine. Tell us how to make it better. If you have an opinion about some aspect of science fiction that the world needs to hear, tell us about that, too, and we'll tell it to the world.

Address your letter to *Amazing Stories*, P.O. Box 767, Kenton WA 98047-0767, or send it via email to amazing@worldnet.com. If we publish your letter (and if you've provided us with a complete mailing address), we'll send you a free copy of that issue on a keeprape.

Corrections

BECAUSE OF AN ERROR in the electronic production process, two lines of text are missing from "The Android Man" by Frederik Pohl in issue #595 (page 24).

The sentence that begins at the bottom of the first column should read as follows:

"The *Stone from the Green Star* is the only one of his novels that he has never allowed to appear in book form."

The text at the bottom of the second column should be:

"... for going on half a century now. The man is a joy. I even go out of my way to spend time with him..."

"THE TRUTH ABOUT Science Fiction" will be broadcast on June 8 on The History Channel, not May 5 as was reported in "From the Editor" in issue #595. According to Lisa Richn at Weller Grossman Productions, the show went through a number of changes (for the better!) during final production, which caused the air date to be delayed.

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Fifty Years Together

IT IS, I AM SOMEWHAT APPALLED TO REALIZE, just about fifty years since I first bought a copy of *AMAZING Stories*. In that half century the magazine and I have both gone through more than a few significant changes of format and policy, and yet here we still are, *AMAZING* and I. It was the great ambition of the small boy who managed to scrape together twenty-five cents in December of 1948 to purchase the issue of *AMAZING* dated February 1949 to succeed, someday, in having a story of his very own published in

that magazine. Well, and so he did; and how I wish I could drop him a line, back there in what now seems the Pleistocene, and tell him how thoroughly he was going to see all his preadolescent hopes and dreams fulfilled!

February 1949

No world could be as dangerous as this one because it was impossible to predict what would happen next—and incredibly mad and deadly things were always happening next!

Editor's introduction to "The Insane Planet" by Alexander Blade

Fifty years. Gone in an eyeblink. I had been reading science fiction in book form for about three years before I discovered that the stuff was published also in magazines. I began when I was about ten—with Jules Verne's *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*—moved on quickly to Wells's *The Time Machine* and Twain's *Connecticut Yankee*, and then to the primordial sf anthologies, Wolfheim's *The Pocket Book of Science Fiction* and the Healy-McComas *Adventures in Time and Space*. The copyright pages of those two books gave me my first clue to the existence of publications called *AMAZING Stories* and *Astonishing Science Fiction* and such, and in the spring of 1948, insatiably hungry now for more of this wondrous kind of fiction and only mildly repelled by their garish names, I began to look around for them.

AMAZING was not actually the first such magazine I bought. That distinction goes to *Weird Tales*, whose July 1948 issue I picked up because of its marvelous cover painting (a unicorn pursued by two winged serpents across a psychedelic sky) and because its lead story, Edmond Hamilton's

"Twilight of the Gods," was a retelling of the good old Odin-Thot-Loki stuff that had given me my first taste of the fantastic years before. I loved it, but the rest of the issue was taken up with vampire tales, ghost stories, and other things not much to my taste. A few weeks later I peered into an issue of *Astonishing*, but it seemed very sober stuff indeed, with a feature article full of wiring diagrams, and I decided to hang on to that month's disposable income. (A quarter was a lot of money in 1948, especially if you were completely dependent on your father's largesse for each one you got.)

But then—then—near the end of the year—

There was the February-dated *AMAZING* blazing out of the magazine rack in the candy store across the street from Junior High School 232. Its cover, illustrating a story called "The Insane Planet," by Alexander Blade, showed an agonized linochlad man writhing in the grip of a leafy bough. "A World Where Even Trees Went Mad," cried the cover caption. (Readers may recall seeing this cover reprinted in issue 594.) There were stories as well by Rog Phillips, Craig Browning, and three other writers, none of whose names I had encountered in the handful of anthologies I had read thus far. I put down my quarter and gleefully tucked

the magazine in my briefcase.

That night, when I should have been doing my Latin homework, I reveled in the big, rough-edged, cheaply printed magazine I had bought. The Blade story was quite fine, I thought. But the true masterpiece of the issue was Rog Phillips's short novel "M-Bong-Ah." It took place on Venus: mysterious tropical Venus, much like steamy Africa only ever so much stranger, inhabited by a race of eight-foot-tall, blue-skinned hairless humanoids with voracious

libidos. My own pubescent libido was heating up nicely that year, and the illustration on page 31 of Gretta, a gigantic Venusian woman in a nearly topless harem costume, was an overwhelming sight. Gretta wished to impart the followings of her people to our spaceman hero. "She began her dance. It was a slow, rhythmic movement with short steps. This is the dance of M-bong-ah," she explained. "It is the dance of the temple girls to the Gods of Venus. . . ." Suddenly, she fumbled with the buttons on her dress. Then she pulled it off in a hasty motion, revealing her wonderful, lithe body. "I cannot dance with clothes on," she said.

By page 33, where we got to see a good deal more of that wonderful, lithe body, I was in love with Gretta. And with *AMAZING Stories*.

Though "M-Bong-Ah" left such a mark on my



September 1950

Man's dream throughout the ages has been to reach the distant planets. But, once there, how can he be sure of getting back?

Editor's introduction to
"You Can't Escape From Mars"
by E. K. Jarvis

May 1956

She was a red-blooded American girl who had a talent for pranks—such as kidnapping Conopseans, undersized extraterrestrials who had no sense of humor and didn't care to be hauled away from hearth and home. Then things began catching up with her and she got snatched herself—into a world that made no sense unless you thought it over while lying on the bottom of a lake.

Editor's introduction to
"The Girl Who Hated Air"
by Milton Lesser

November 1964

Ever since he was a little boy, Sam Burnham had wanted to be an adventurer of the starways. Instead, he had become an accountant. But now he had a crazy chance to blaze the star-roads for God, and country, and far Space Products, Inc.

Editor's introduction to
"Rider in the Sky"
by Raymond F. Jones

imagination that I began writing my own sequel to it that very night—not on paper, but in my mind as I lay in bed, for how could I sleep after such an experience?—there was another section of the issue that caught my interest the next day, a column called "The Club House," written by the very same Rog Phillips who had penned that masterly story. The column dealt with science fiction fandom—a world of people who shared my newfound enthusiasm for the fantastic, and actually got together at conventions to talk about science fiction, and published their own little magazines, things called "fanzines," with tantalizing names like *Chronoscope* and *Kotan* and *Plover*. Fascinating! Entrancing! Irresistible! For an investment of two bits I had changed the entire direction of my life.

I bought the next issue of *AMAZING*, of course ("The Chemical Vampire," by Lee Francis, and the unforgettable novella "The Swordsman of Pira," by Charles

By page 33, where we got to see a good deal more of that wonderful,

Reccor), and I ran over to Jackson's Book Store—where in an earlier phase of my life I had bought armloads of back issues of *The National Geographic Magazine* to further my studies of exotic lands—and purchased from that grubby and sinister merchant a thick stack of old *AMAZING*s at three issues for a quarter. Here was "Titan's Daughter" by Richard S. Shaver, which the cover caption told me was "A Smashing Sequel to the Sensational 'Gods of Venus,'" and Arthur Petticoat's "Dinosaur Destroyer," "The Story of Daarmajd, the Strong—Mighty King of the Prehistoric World," and Alexander Blade again with "The Brain" ("A Giant Calculating Machine Decides to Rule the World!"), and—and—

Well, I was lost. I collected all the *AMAZING*s I could find, back unto the immensely thick issues of 1942, and then the archaic-looking ones of 1934, and the large-format ones of the late 1920s. Those cherished magazines seemed incredibly ancient to me, although the oldest of them dated back only fifteen or twenty years. The Jimmy Carter



The great one. Arkhild really is the best as it is coming of the old ones



▲ The budding author at 13

lithe body, I was in love with Gretta. And with *AMAZING* Stories.

presidency is more distant in time from our era than those old magazines were then to mine.

Yearning to become a science fiction writer myself, I began feverishly to scribble little stories and send them to the editor of *AMAZING* in Chicago. (I got them back with the speed of light.) I subscribed to a few fanzines, and by the fall of 1949 I was publishing my own, an execrable and illegible little thing called *Spaceship*. I started to read *AMAZING*'s virtually identical companion magazine, *Fantastic Adventures*, and then *Arounding* and *Startling* and all the other sf magazines of the day. Gradually, as I ripened into a worldly-wise fifteen-year-old, I began to see that Rog Phillips and Alexander Blade and Charles Reccor and my other literary heroes of 1948 and 1949 were mere penny-a-word hacks, and stories like "M-Boog-Ah" and "The Brain" were the veriest crude junk, suitable only for impressionable children like my own self of two years before. But I forgave myself for my youthful lack of discrimination.

The home office of *AMAZING* and *Fantastic*

July 1926

A few letters have come to the Editor's desk from some readers who wish to know what prompts us to so frequently preface our stories in our introductory remarks with the statement that this or that scientific plot is not impossible, but quite probable. These readers seem to have the idea that we try to impress our friends with the fact that whatever is printed in *Amazing Stories* is not necessarily pure fiction, but could or can be fact. That impression is correct. We do wish to do so, and have tried to do so ever since we started *Amazing Stories*. As a matter of fact, our editorial policy is built upon this structure and will be so continued indefinitely.

"Fiction Versus Fact, Extraneous Fiction Today." *Cold Feet Tomorrow*, Hugo Gernsback, editor



the magazine's longtime editor, did not choose to go along. His place was taken by shrewd, hard-boiled Howard Browne, a well-known mystery novelist who had written some decent adventure stories for Palmer's magazines. Browne dutifully maintained *AMAZING's* juvenile tone for a couple of years, since the magazine had attained the highest circulation in the sf field by serving up action fiction for boys. But his heart was in publishing more sophisticated material, and in 1952 he killed off *Fantastic Adventures* and began an elegant-looking companion simply called *Fantastic*, with slick paper and stories by the likes of Ray Bradbury, Isaac Asimov, and Theodore Sturgeon. The following year he converted dear old pulpy *AMAZING* to the same handsome format, banished the high-volume hack writers, and added Robert A. Heinlein and Arthur C. Clarke to his new list of high-octane contributors.



It had taken me just seven years to make the transition from wonderstruck new reader to cool, calculating professional.

◀ Silverberg (center) in September 1956. "I'm still beardless, but now I'm a pro."

It sounded good, but I wondered if Browne could really deliver the goods. The wide-eyed preadolescent of 1948 was now the suave college kid of 1952; my "M-Bong-Ah" phase was over and I believed (wrongly) that Browne's previous predilection for primordially adventure tales showed him to be unqualified to edit an sf magazine for mature readers like me. I said so, quite acidly, in one of the fanzines to which I was now a regular contributor. Browne actually replied with an essay of his own, remarking, "These jackals grow too bold," and going on to refute every point of my attack. I was surprised that he had even deigned to notice.

We jump now three years. I was as eager as ever for a career as a science fiction writer; I was turning out stories at a steady pace despite the distractions of college life and had actually begun getting a few of them published. By the spring of 1955 I had sold my first novel and acquired a literary agent. But progress was slow; sales were few and far between.

That year a well-established sf writer named Randall Garrett turned up in New York and rented a room in the same apartment building near Columbia University where I was living. "You won't get anywhere in this field unless you know the editors personally," he said, and took me downtown to introduce me to them. Among

those we visited was Howard Browne of *AMAZING Stories*. "This is Bob Silverberg," Garrett said. "He's one of the hottest new writers around. You need to be publishing him." And I handed Howard a story called "Next Door," from the e.e. cummings line, "There's a hell of a good universe next door—let's go!"

It wasn't a great story. My own agent had declined to market it, calling it too thin and elementary to be salable. Even after I rewrote it for him, he sent it back and advised me to put it aside, saying the idea "lacked strong story possibilities." But Howard Browne glanced quickly through it as Garrett and I sat there in his office that August afternoon. "Sure," he said. "I'll buy it. Forty bucks." It ran in the January 1956 issue of *AMAZING* under the title of "Hole in the Air." It had taken me just seven years to make the transition from wonderstruck new reader to cool, calculating professional.

To my own great flabbergastation I discovered

that I had moved right into the sort of slot that had been occupied, in *AMAZING's* Chicago days under Ray Palmer, by the men who wrote under the names of "Rog Phillips," "Charles Recour," and "Alexander Blade." For Howard Browne, after a couple of years of trying to run a quality sf magazine and seeing circulation drop sharply, had stopped publishing Heinlein and Bradbury and that ilk, and had gone back to the old policy of two-listed adventure fiction, written (I now knew) by a staff of hired hands who turned in their stories on a quota system, so many thousands of words a month, everything bought sight unseen and published virtually without editing.

Instead of reconstructing the old Chicago stable of writers, Browne was busy gathering about him a New York-based staff of high-volume writers who would show up every Monday with the previous week's output, collect their checks, and go home to get busy on the next undying masterpiece. With the aid of Randall Garrett's sponsorship of me, I landed a place in that crew. One cent a word, \$50 for a 5,000-word story, \$150 for a 15,000-word lead novelette, a guarantee of 50,000 words purchased every month, nothing rejected so long as I did a decent job within the confines of the basic story formulas.

I was in my senior year at Columbia, about to get married, and the offer of a steady, predictable

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The Observatory

November 1939

The earth officials living on Mars were getting along fine, until the horrible Martian Zombies decided to revolt and drive the Earthmen from their planet. Then there was hell to pay . . . !

Editor's introduction to "Legion of the Dead" by Frederick Arnold Kuusert, Jr.



July 1968

What the mind has not experienced it cannot describe . . . That may be true for the ordinary man—but not for this writer—who takes us on a swing through the future, to the most real, most three-dimensional world ever experienced. Even though it hasn't come into existence . . . yet.

Editor's introduction to "Honor A-Flare" by Samuel E. Delany



income stream was a godsend. Each week, without fail, I brought Howard a story or two, the very same sort of straightforward hero-villain stuff that had hooked me on *AMAZING* in the era of Alexander Blade. Once in a while I craftily slipped in a manuscript from the pile of those I had unsuccessfully tried to sell to the higher-grade sci magazines over the past couple of years, stories of rather greater literary aspiration than the ones I was doing for *AMAZING* now, but Howard didn't object to their lack of pulpiness, since in fact I don't think he read the stories we delivered at all.

Because just a handful of writers were producing all the copy for both *AMAZING* and *Fantastic* (submissions that came in from unwitting outsiders were returned unread), pseudonyms were a necessity. The June 1956 issue of *AMAZING* contained Robert Silverberg's "Entrance Exam," but also a Garrett-Silverberg collaboration called "Gambler's Planet" under the byline of Gordon Aghill. July saw another Aghill opus, "Catch a Thief," plus "Run of Luck" by Calvin Knox—me—and "Stay Out of My Grave" by Ralph Burke. (I could not tell you today, even at gunpoint, what those stories were about. But the three of them paid a whole month's rent with something left over.) The August issue gave the world the memorable Garrett-Silverberg novella "The Beast With Seven Tails," which we wrote as Leonard G. Spencer, and I'm in the issue as Silverberg and Knox as well.

And so it went, month after month, a ton of stories, Garrett and I writing all of *AMAZING* practically single-handed, with some help from the veteran pro Milton Lesser and a new kid named Harlan Ellison. I hit one big high point—or, perhaps, a low one—with the August 1956 issue of *Fantastic*, in which four of the six stories were my doing, led off by my dazzling tale, "Guardian of the Crystal Gate," in which stylistic echoes of "M-Bong-Ah" can readily be detected. Some months later came another great moment when something of mine appeared in print under the name of Alexander Blade—for, as it happened, old Alex was nobody in particular, simply a house name that the editor hung on stories that needed pseudonyms in a hurry. And so I came full circle: The little boy who had been dazzled by those great Alexander Blade stories of 1948 had within the space of nine years turned into Alexander Blade himself.

After I had been a staff writer for Howard Browne's *AMAZING* for a year or so, Howard pulled a lovely little surprise on me. I came into his office to deliver my latest batch of stories and he drew from his desk the issue of the fanzine in which my younger self had denounced him so cuttingly in

1952. "Remember this?" he asked. He had known all along, of course, that the Robert Silverberg whom he had taken into his editorial bosom was the very same viper who had attacked him with such vitriol a few years before. I muttered something sheepishly about the impetuosity of youth, but of course he had long since forgiven me for my adolescent indiscretion, and he went on buying stories from me by the carload for the rest of his editorial career.

All that was forty years ago. Howard resigned eventually and went back to writing mystery novels—he's still doing it, I hear, at the age of ninety or so—and by 1959, when Cele Goldsmith had become editor, the policy of having the magazine entirely written by a staff of three or four hired hands had given way to the more orthodox arrangement of seeking contributions from any qualified writer. Which is why the July 1959 issue has stories by Robert Sheekley and Ray Bradbury in it, and quite a good one, not hackwork at all, by Randall Garrett, and—yes—the short novel "Collision Course" by Robert Silverberg. For I had survived the transition and was still submitting—and selling—stories to *AMAZING*.

Formats, policies, even publishers have come and gone for *AMAZING* many times since then. Cele Goldsmith's regime gave way to that of Joseph Ross, who was replaced by Harry Harrison and then Barry Malzberg, and after him Ted White. Eleanor Mavor followed White and George Scithers followed her, and then came Pat Price and now Kim Mohan, who has guided the magazine for two different publishing houses.

And, decade in and decade out, through thick and thin, there's never been a time when I haven't been a contributor to *AMAZING*. Some virus got into me, I suppose, that wintry day in 1948 when I found myself staring at the issue that was to bring Rog Phillips's "M-Bong-Ah" and Alexander Blade's "The Insane Planet" into my life, and I will never be able to rid myself of it. Even now, old and weary and white-bearded as I am, I find myself beginning to sketch out yet another story for *AMAZING*, the new and shiny incarnation of it that Kim Mohan is operating. This magazine and I have been together, somehow, man and boy, for fifty years: Why stop now? 🐱

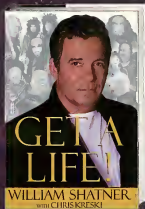
about the Author



Robert Silverberg won a Hugo Award in 1956 as Most Promising New Author, and hasn't looked back since. He has published dozens of novels and hundreds of short stories (the vast majority of them under his own name) and is a multiple Hugo and Nebula Award winner. His latest novel is *The Alien Years* from HarperPrism.

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A Star Wars State of Mind

Have you caught the fever?

THINK BACK. It's 1983. *Return of the Jedi* packs in the crowds at movie theaters, but it's a bittersweet time. *Jedi*, for all intents and purposes, appears to be the last new addition to the *Star Wars* mythos for the foreseeable future. A wonderful comic strip, *Bloom County*, captures the feelings of *Star Wars* fans everywhere. . . .

Our hero Binkley, outfitted like Luke Skywalker, asks, "Is it a wrap?" "Not quite," George Lucas informs him. "Six more chapters to go. I should get to them all by . . . oh . . . 1998."

Binkley/Luke swings his lightsaber—**FOOSH!**—separating Mr. Lucas's head from his body.

Binkley/Luke proclaims, "Jedi Knights don't wait fifteen years for a sequel."

Yes, Binkley. Yes, they do.

Fast forward. It's early January 1999 as I write this. The years have flown by, and a few of the details have changed concerning the *Star Wars* franchise. Six more chapters have been trimmed down to just three, for example, and 1998 came and went without a new *Star Wars* film (though we got to see a great preview trailer).

Fifteen years? Try sixteen! That's how long it's been since that prophetic comic strip was published and a new *Star Wars* movie has graced the silver screen. "Jedi Knights," or "fans," as I like to refer to them, waited. And waited. And waited some more. Now, as the release of *Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace* draws ever closer, anticipation and excitement have achieved an all-time high.

The wait is almost over.

We're in a *Star Wars* state of mind.

What's that mean? Look around. *Star Wars* items fill the shelves at toy stores everywhere: action figures, vehicles,

playsets, boardgames, computer and console games, and real soon now we'll even have

Star Wars Lego building blocks to play with and collect. Visit a bookstore

and check out the hardcover and paperback sections: novels, short-story collections, encyclopedias, guides of all kinds, art books, annotated scripts, and more on the way. Comic books? Dark Horse has been pumping out new stories and adaptations of novels for years now. The *Star Wars* frenzy is about to reach a fever pitch as opening day approaches, and that's a *Star Wars* state of mind.

Do you have it? I'm sure you do. You at least have the symptoms, if not a full-blown case. You pick up an action figure or two to play with when nobody is looking, or you've got a wardrobe that includes a T-shirt with Chewbacca's or Boba Fett's face on it, or you're reading one of the newest novels. If you've got it bad, you buy two sets of action figures so that you can open one "Darth Vader with removable helmet" and keep the second one sealed and in mint condition. (You never know what this stuff might be worth some day!)

Then there are those of us who have it *really* bad. I admit it; I fall into this category. We're the ones who have spent years imagining what the first three movies would be like (the original *Star Wars* film was labeled "Episode IV"). We've carefully gone over every hint and reference to the earlier time period, searching the original trilogy, the movie novelizations, and every interview with George Lucas we could lay our hands on to construct our own versions of Episodes I, II, and III. We're the people who get all excited when we hear a riff of the famous John Williams musical score or the powerful hum of a lightsaber. We live vicariously through others, listening intently when Steven Spielberg tantalized reporters with his assessment of the Episode I footage he



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- DARTH VADER

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had seen a few months back.

"Oh, my God," Spielberg exclaimed.

"What?" we asked anxiously. "Do you mean Oh-my-God-this-stinks-to-high-heaven or Oh-my-God-that-was-utterly-fantastic?" Of course, he meant the latter, telling the reporters that "your jaw will hang open for a week." He also pointed out that the film was so good that he wouldn't open one of his movies anywhere near the thing, not for three or four weeks either before or after it hits the theaters.

That's all part of the frenzy, and other movie studio executives seem to be following Spielberg's lead. Industry insiders are already predicting that it's going to out-Titanic Titanic (the number-one grossing movie of all time, beating out the original *Star Wars* by \$140 million or so). Mike Myers even used the frenzy to his advantage in the recent preview for his next *Austin Powers* movie. In a clever takeoff on a scene from *Return of the Jedi*, the voice-over tells the audience that "if you can see just one movie this summer, see *Star Wars*. But if you can see two, see *Austin Powers*, too."

The frenzy has been planned and carefully developed over the last twelve years. It started innocently enough in 1987, with Lucas' film's tenth anniversary celebration of the release of the original film. That year, the Star Tours attraction opened in Disneyland, and West End Games published the *Star Wars Roleplaying Game*. After a few lean years, new *Star Wars* products were hitting the market. Much of West End's material, such as *The Star Wars Sourcebook*, con-

tained details and information never available before. Not only were the fans who had seen the original theatrical releases of the movies seeking out this new material, but so was a whole new generation of fans who had seen the films only on video.

In 1991, the frenzy really got going. That was the year that the first new *Star Wars* fiction hit the shelves. Up to that point, everything from West End dealt with the time frame depicted



in the movie trilogy. Timothy Zahn's novel, *Heir to the Empire*, took us beyond the movies and into the era of the New Republic—it was set about five years after the events in *Jedi*. The book rocketed to the top of the *New York Times* bestsellers list, and suddenly *Star Wars* was hot again. In fact, it was about to get even hotter. In quick succession, we saw more novels, the return of action figures and vehicles from Kenner and Galoob, computer games, trading cards, and a host of other *Star Wars* collectibles. The rumors of new *Star Wars* movies, which started as wild speculation but were eventually confirmed by George Lucas himself, hit like a proton torpedo in the Death Star's exhaust port and ignited an explosion of interest.

Originally, everyone believed that the first of the

new movies would hit the screens in May 1997—just in time for the twentieth anniversary of the original film. That was not to be, but Lucasfilm made it up to the fans by releasing the Special Edition versions of the original trilogy that year. Not only were the films cleaned up and shown on the big screen for the first time in years, the Special Editions also contained new scenes and restored footage. It was won-

In 1991, Timothy Zahn's novel, *Heir to the Empire*, took us beyond the movies and into the era of the New Republic. The book rocketed to the top of the *New York Times* bestsellers list, and suddenly *Star Wars* was hot again.

derful seeing them in the theater again, and the box-office bonanza these films generated convinced any remaining doubters that the *Star Wars* franchise was a phenomenon to be reckoned with.

As 1998 was drawing to a close, visions of a new *Star Wars* film and the impact it could make were generating fear and excitement throughout the movie industry. Studios were busy clearing the decks, conceding the month of May to George Lucas's new *Star Wars* epic and making sure no other big picture would compete with it for opening weekend supremacy. Fans, hungry for hints about the new story, scoured the Internet for rumors and speculation. Lucas began to release images and details, giving away enough to keep people interested without providing too much too soon.

We got to find out which actors had been selected and

what parts they were going to play. Ewan McGregor was the young Obi-Wan Kenobi. Jake Lloyd was the young Anakin Skywalker. Other actors included Liam Neeson, Terence Stamp, Samuel L. Jackson, Ian McDiarmid, and Natalie Portman. We learned that Yoda and R2-D2 and C-3PO would appear in the film, and the title was finally revealed—*The Phantom Menace*. But, for all the excitement, doubts still remained.

Could George Lucas recapture the magic? Would the new movie be any good?

Then, in the middle of November, fans were treated to their first glimpse of the new movie. The first preview (or "theatrical trailer," if you prefer) was attached to special screenings of *Meet Joe Black* and *The Waterboy* a few days before it was put into wide release. I admit it. I left work early that day and went to see the special preview. And you know what? For about two minutes I was a kid again.

The preview was fantastic! It was everything I hoped it would be—familiar and brand-new at the same time. It was definitely in the *Star Wars* family, but it didn't appear to be just a clone of the original film. As the theater went dark, I held my breath in anticipation. When the preview ended, I let it out again and decided that all my worrying had been for nothing.

You may not be able to go home again, but it looks like you can go back to a galaxy far, far away.

Granted, the preview showed only a fraction of the finished movie, but I didn't see anything that made me scream, "Not What were you thinking?" Instead, I just let the rapidly shifting scenes transport me back to that long-ago time. I let them fill me with awe and anticipation. For a few moments, I wasn't a *Star Wars* "professional" anymore. I was just a fan. And I was a happy fan. The rest of the movie might change these feelings, but I don't think so. I have faith, and I believe that the Force is still with Mr. Lucas. In fact, I think it's very strong in the man.

The preview starts with the haunting sounds of John Williams's original score playing over a darkened screen that gradually lightens to reveal thick mist. Unidentified riders atop strange creatures emerge from the mist and we are told that "Every generation has a legend. . . ."

The music continues and we see an unknown ship perched in the familiar deserts of Tatooine. We are informed that "Every journey has a first step. . . ."

Our eyes feast upon a regal city, ships flying overhead with a whoosh that harkens back to our first encounters with X-wings and TIE fighters. The scene shifts, and we're inside one of the regal towers, gazing upon a richly adorned young woman. She's standing by herself in the large chamber, and we find out that "Every saga has a beginning. . . ."

The music swells, gains speed, grows louder. For a moment, we hear the omni-

nous sound of Darth Vader's heavy breathing. Then the pace picks up and the roller coaster ride begins! The images flash by in quick succession, tantalizing our senses and making us wish we could slow it down just a bit. (No! Go faster! Show us more!)

Speeders racing through a rocky desert canyon. A huge spherical ship hanging in space, reminiscent of the Death Star but with a tire-shaped ship wrapped around it. A blaster fight raging in the streets of a wondrous city. A

You may not be able to go home again, but it looks like you can go back to a galaxy far, far away.



gigantic floating tank crashing through a forest. A young boy named Anakin Skywalker. "He can see things before they happen." "The Force is unusually strong with him," Anakin meets a young man named Obi-Wan Kenobi. Yoda. "The boy is dangerous." "A nasty-looking humanoid with a double-bladed lightsaber. Space battles! Anakin behind the controls of a starfighter! R2-D2! C-3PO! Where's his golden skin? An army of war droids atop flying gunpods! Heroes leaping across gaping chasms! The music reaches maximum intensity! A colorful explosion in space! The tide appears! The crowd applauds! Wow!

And we can't wait to see it again! (Happily, the special preview preview came up on

the screen again after the movie.)

Now I try to calm my racing thoughts. There's still four months to go as I write this, and I'm not sure how I'm going to hold out. If you're reading this, you're so lucky. Thanks to the wonders of time travel (or what we call



publishing deadlines!), it should be only a few short weeks until *The Phantom Menace* premieres. You don't have to try to be patient. You don't have to try to avoid hearing any more secrets when what you really want is to KNOW EVERYTHING THAT'S GOING TO HAPPEN!

You know what I'm talking about. Part of you wants to be totally surprised by the new movie, but another part wants to know all about the plot and the characters and the special effects. That way leads to the dark side! Hide your eyes, put your fingers in your ears, and chant, "La-la-la-la—I can't hear you!" whenever you see a magazine or a TV show that promises to reveal the secrets of *The Phantom Menace*.

We've got enough preconceptions about the movie bouncing around in our collective imagination. That's the *Star Wars* state of mind. Don't

add more to it. You want to see it with as untainted a view as possible. That's going to be hard to do, though, because *Star Wars* fever is going to build to an epidemic before the film comes out.

Anyway, I've taken up enough of your time. I'm going off to wait for the next preview to debut (that should happen in March, if my sources are correct). Uh-oh! More and more magazines are appearing every day, threatening to reveal details of the plot and tempting me with enigmatic photos of Sith Lords and Jedi Masters. And the novelization is coming out soon, written by Terry Brooks, and . . .

Aw, the heck with it—I want every scrap of *Star Wars* info I can get! Blame it on my state of mind. ☹

About the author



Bill Stronach has been professionally involved with the Star Wars universe since 1986. In that time, he has written or edited more than twenty Star Wars Roleplaying Game products (including The Star Wars Sourcebook, The Heir to the Empire Sourcebook, and The Death Star Technical Companion). He managed the Star Wars line for West End Games for four years, and wrote The Updated Guide to the Star Wars Universe for Del Rey Books. He is currently wrapping up a new version for publication next year.

Bill lives in Seattle, where he serves as the Director of Roleplaying Games R&D at Wizards of the Coast, Inc.

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REVELAT

GUNNERY SERGEANT ANDRE MADRID watched the vidscreen in shocked disbelief. His companions, huddled together like children caught in the path of an oncoming storm, looked to him for assurance. He had none to give. As the satellite images flooded the small, static-filled screen, he was struck by the grim certainty that neither he nor the young cadets under his command would survive the coming ordeal.

Madrid watched as the satellite tracked two impossibly huge Protoss warships descending from high orbit. Sealed within a reinforced shelter beneath the surface of the planet Chau Sara, Madrid wondered if the colonial fleet orbiting the planet had offered any real resistance to the alien vessels. He looked about the room and saw the terrified cadets clutching anxiously at their unfired Gauss rifles. Stifling a panicked giggle, he briefly visualized the absurd notion of the cadets tossing pebbles at a landslide.

Warning klaxons shattered the stillness as the ships reached striking distance from the planet. Emergency floodlights bathed the shelter in an apophic crimson haze. Madrid saw first one, then two bright flashes emanate from the belly of the first ship. They all watched in horror as enormous bolts of azure fire rained from the sky. The cadets began to scream, curse, and pray to whatever awaited them in the hereafter. Madrid held his breath behind gritted teeth and felt the first tremors of the firestorm.

A pure white light filled the vidscreen and then gradually subsided to a burning vortex of flame. The fireball, which seemed to reach clear to the roof of the sky, spread itself out over the vast desert, consuming everything in its path. The reinforced paristeeled walls of the room shuddered as the Protoss vessels continued to rain their devastation upon the planet.

Memories of the stories from his mother's tattered old Bible raced through Madrid's mind as he pictured the horrific imagery of the final judgment of Armageddon. Yet he couldn't bring himself to believe that this wanton destruction was a prophesied act of God. It was an act of sheer will; a cold, calculated display of power by the vile, soulless Protoss.

The brightness of the vidscreen forced him to squint as he watched the fireball thunder toward the shelter. The cadets' panic reached a fevered pitch as shock waves ripped through the shuddering room. Above the furor of the seismic assault, he could hear anguished screams of pure terror.

Madrid woke with a start.

As he sat trying to calm the pounding of his heart, he could still hear the screams echoing in his ears. He got up from his bunk and walked out of the barracks into the cold morning air. Shakily, he dug his fingers into a slightly crumpled pack of Rebel Reds and pulled out a cigarette. Cupping the open flame of his lighter, he took a drag off the harsh smoke and wandered aimlessly across the compound.

It had been nearly three weeks since the mysterious Protoss had appeared and burned the unsuspecting world of Chau Sara. Miraculously, Madrid had survived. Thanks to the signal of his personal emergency transceiver, he and a handful of others were found under the shelter's ruins by a nearby Confederate medevac team. He remembered looking down and marveling at the devastation that stretched across the burning horizon as the dropship carried him away from the planet.

BY CHRIS METZEN
AND SAMUEL MOORE
ILLUSTRATION BY SAMWISE

For the past two weeks, Madrid had tried to lose himself in the monotony of his duties in a new unit stationed on the planet Mar Sara. He watched as the sun rose over the rocky landscape that was a stark contrast to the rolling green plains of his former home—plains that were now as desolate as the terrain he surveyed all around him.

He took a final drag off his cigarette and crushed it under his boot. As a marine, he had seen his share of the horrors of war. That was the life of a marine. But the Protoss attack on Chau Sara had shown him a new kind of horror—a horror he could barely comprehend. Fleeting images of the friends and family he had lost on Chau Sara drifted through his mind.

The sudden wail of sirens broke the early morning calm, snapping Madrid out of his haze. Marines appeared everywhere, running to their stations with their tac-gear and weapons in tow. He sprinted back to his barracks. As always, his power suit was left nearly assembled with his Gauss rifle right beside it. He was locked in and geared up in less than a minute. After a ritual check to confirm that his rifle was loaded, he dashed out toward one of the defensive bunkers that encircled the compound.

As he stepped down into the bunker, the other marines inside were concentrating on the horizon, scanning for any sign of hostile forces. The bunker was little more than a prefab paristeeled box sunk into the ground. Big enough for a handful of marines and a few supplies, a combat bunker was designed to take massive punishment while the marines inside could fire on everything around it in relative safety. Some of the marines called them battlefield coffins, but as far as Madrid was concerned they were better than crouching

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behind a rock. He took his place next to the others and turned his attention to the landscape outside.

The auto-response missile turrets in the distance began firing before Madrid could see their targets. Hundreds of deadly missiles filled the sky, disappearing into fiery explosions just over the horizon. Feeling his heart skip a beat, he pushed the small button on the side of his helmet that lowered his sight visor. As the darkened visor closed over his face, small holographic projections and status displays appeared before his eyes. Switching the visor to infrared mode, Madrid could see the landscape broken into pixelated patches of reds and blues. To his horror, he saw that the dim haze on the horizon was composed of hundreds of spindly flying creatures approaching the camp at high speed.

The creatures sped toward the missile turrets. Hundreds of the twisted flyers swooped down, spewing flames from their open jaws. Even as the missiles blasted dozens of creatures from the sky, many of the turrets exploded under the assault of the alien swarm.

Madrid's com unit blared in his ear. "Fire Base Chimera, this is recon patrol zero-nine," the voice shouted. "Advancing force is negative for Protoss profile. Repeat—advancing force is *not* Protoss. We are receiving heavy fire from unclassified hostiles. Please advise."

A second transmission cut in: "All units, this is Command Bravo. Unclassified life forms confirmed," a smooth, detached voice reported. "Stand to repel attack. Life forms confirmed hostile."

"They got that part right," one of the marines growled as another turret exploded in the distance. Everyone kept focused on the advancing aliens, peering through thick smoke as thousands of horrible creatures scrambled madly toward the base. These ground units were different from the flyers, but just as deadly. They surged over the remaining turrets, destroying them with devastating volleys of razor-spines.

Madrid had become so mesmerized by the chaos in the distance that he almost missed the fact that a group of aliens closing on the bunker had come within firing range. With fangs bared, a mob of leathery, catlike creatures rushed toward the electrified wire that surrounded the base. As the first line was blasted apart, another wave rushed in. Pulling his rifle to the left, Madrid fired into a writhing mass of aliens. Mutilated bodies began piling up around the base's perimeter. For every creature that fell, it seemed two more rushed in to take its place.

A group of snakelike aliens marched forward and showered the bunker with hundreds of deadly razor-spines. Many of the spines rained in through the multiple gunports, and Madrid felt the body of a marine drop next to him. With a defiant roar, a marine equipped with Firebat combat armor opened up with his twin flamethrowers. Concentrated napalm enveloped the frenzied creatures, and dozens of them fell to the ground in burning heaps.

Minutes passed like hours as Madrid spent clip after clip. The battlefield was littered with thousands of their dead, yet the aliens kept coming. *It's better than Chou Sara*, he thought. *At*

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least here I have a fighting chance.

He cleared his mind of everything but the monsters' lifeless black eyes and lost himself in the rhythmic recoil of his rifle.

The bunker began to shudder violently as the flyers attacked it from above. Massive cracks appeared in the parietal roof as it began to collapse. Lost in the heat of battle, Madrid was startled when the Firebat grabbed his shoulder.

"The bunker's toast!" he yelled. "If we ain't outta here soon, we're gonna end up sharin' a tombstone."

"Full back to the command center," Madrid barked at the others as he let loose another burst from his rifle. "Move!"

Madrid broke for the exit hatch as what was left of the squad made its way out. Emerging from the darkened bunker into the light of the midmorning sun, he almost froze in his tracks as he surveyed the compound. The scene was complete chaos. Huge winged beasts swarmed over the base, showering everything with blasts of burning plasma. Other small, jittery aliens ran rampant through the compound, streaming past the bunkers and tearing into any marines that stood in their path. Madrid fired wildly at a group of the creatures, hoping to butcher them before they fixed their attention on him. *This place is a killing ground*, he thought.

Madrid turned toward the base's command center and caught a brief glimpse of a huge, raylike creature flying overhead. He heard a sickly spurring sound and felt a hammering blow strike him from behind, knocking him back to the ground. As the world spun around him, he could feel a searing pain in his back that spread through his limbs like tentacles of wildfire. He was dimly aware of something lifting him up as he lost consciousness.

MADRID WOKE TO FIND HIMSELF staring at the ceiling of a stark room. Pain wracked his body, and his head swam. He fought dizziness and confusion as memories rushed into his head. *Protoss are wiping us out as we hide here covering underground. Their ships are annihilating everything on the planet's surface like the hand of God. No, not the Protoss*, he thought. *That's not right. Something else is out there. Strange images flashed in his mind. A sea of horrible creatures washing over the base, tearing through everything in their path. Wait, who are the Protoss?* he tried to remember. *Those things out there are coming to kill me. Where's my rifle? What happened to my squad? I need to kill them all. Kill. Kill* His blood boiled within him, calling forth a primal instinct. *Kill who? The Protoss? I have to get out of here. Keep moving. Kill.*

A face loomed over him. It was human. He could see its mouth moving, speaking to him.

"Where the hell am I?" Madrid asked. He saw other marines around him, some moving about the room and others sprawled on the floor.

"Just lie back and rest easy, Sergeant. We're under the command center. You're safe here," the young field medic said. "At least for a while." Madrid was covered in both red and purple blood, and his power suit had been split open down the front.

He could see that the medic had applied field dressings to his wounds and had stitched up a deep cut in his chest.

"What's wrong with me, boy? Why can't I move?" he asked.

A look of consternation crossed the medic's face. "You were hit," the medic told him, "by one of those things. I don't know what it was, but your vitals were freaking out. As far as I can tell, there's some kind of poison in your system, but I've never seen anything like it before. I injected you with a stim-pack, so you may experience a little anxiety." With that, the medic was gone.

Madrid tried to stand up. He felt the stim coursing through his system, tightening his muscles and making his scalp crawl. However, the artificial energy boost was no match for his pain and fatigue, so he slumped down heavily against the wall.

The room appeared to be some kind of storage space. A few transport crates were stacked in the corner, but Madrid couldn't make out the stenciled writing on their sides. The room had no windows or fixtures, just four steel-gray walls and a doorway. The medic was busy tending to injured men and others who just sat staring into space with glazed eyes. Marines ran back and forth through the hallway outside, occasionally entering the room to confer with men who were frantically speaking into portable com systems. Madrid couldn't make out what they were saying.

Too weak to move, all he could do was sit and wait. Death was coming. His rifle lay beside him, for all the use it was. His mind reeled. *We're doomed.*

What did we do to bring this on? Both of these races appeared and descended on our worlds like plagues. Fighting them is pointless. They'll spread through the stars, taking planet after planet. Unyielding. Unstoppable. He saw the spindly aliens in his mind, spreading across entire galaxies, overwhelming everything, fulfilling their dread destiny.

"No!" Madrid screamed as his body convulsed. *What's happening to me? I need to get out of here. They're coming for me.* He was trembling. He saw other wounded marines staring at him in detached sympathy. *This is crazy. His fists were clenched, and he couldn't stop grinding his teeth. If only I could get out there, he thought again. I'll kill them all. Exterminate them. Nothing else matters. It is my destiny. We will sweep through the stars, driving the others before us. We will prosper. We are unyielding.*

Visions of marines being torn apart by deadly claws filled his mind. *No, this is all wrong. I'm not thinking right. A coppery taste filled his mouth, and he felt a thin trickle of fluid drip down onto his chest. Blood. I'm dying, he thought. No, it is our enemies who will die. Death cannot stop us. That feeling came to him with complete certainty. The visions continued. Huge creatures leaped over the dead bodies of their brethren and pushed on toward the enemy.*

These aren't my thoughts, he realized with horror. He still sat in the same spot with his back against the cold wall. The sounds of gunfire echoed down the hall. Where are these thoughts coming from? He clasped his head in his hands and doubled over in pain. A sickening sensation crawled through his veins, from his stomach up to his brain. The backs of his eyeballs felt so hot they could melt.

A flurry of bizarre images and impressions assaulted him. Two ominous thoughts stood out from the maddening din and shook him to the core: *You are growing. You are mine.*

Madrid screamed until he ran out of breath.

He had felt another presence within his mind. *What are you?* He searched for it in his thoughts, but found nothing. Suddenly a horrifying image overtook him, eclipsing all else: a sprawling mass of living tissue pulsing with a dark, alien intelligence. Madrid reeled as he felt its sinister consciousness permeate his being. Although he had feeling throughout his body, he found himself unable—or perhaps not allowed—to move.

Gunfire and screaming erupted in the hallway, ripping Madrid out of his trance. A number of marines backed into the room, firing their rifles into the hallway. The wounded men around him sat up in alarm as a group of aliens skittered into the room and tore into the defending marines. Everyone capable of movement grabbed a weapon and tried to fend off the invaders. The creatures flooded the room and overwhelmed the scrambling Terrans, tearing them to pieces. Madrid closed his eyes to shut out the sight of the carnage. Wet, slashing sounds and the tortured screams of the dying filled his ears until the fighting ceased and all that remained was a soft, humming vibration.

Madrid opened his eyes to see two of the creatures staring straight at him, standing close enough that he could feel their hot breath as they sniffed him. Their black, menacing eyes were hooded by the flat carapace plates that adorned their bestial heads. Their muscular, catlike bodies were covered by tough, leathery skin, and long segmented tails stretched out behind them.

Madrid closed his eyes and waited for the creatures to strike. But just as suddenly as they had appeared, they skittered out of the room, leaving him alone among the dead. Minutes stretched into hours as he sat in the dark corner, contemplating his fate and trying to shut out the huring whispers of the alien voice in his head.

FINALLY THE ROOM'S SILENCE was broken by shrill screams echoing down the hallway. Madrid cowered, frozen in place and unable to pry his gaze from the entryway. He could hear scuffling and scratching noises in the hallway. *Have they come back to kill me?* he wondered. As his vision faded to red, he focused his thoughts toward the creatures scurrying in the hallway and briefly touched their bestial minds.

Four creatures. All of them alien. All of them born of the same terrible species.

Three small creatures, like those who had killed everyone else in the room, skittered through the hallway. However, a far more frightening creature accompanied them. This was a dark, clever beast, and Madrid reeled from its soulless presence.

One small creature snaked its head around the door frame. The catlike alien stood there for a moment just staring into Madrid's eyes. It scurried forward and cleared a path of entrance for its brethren. The two others entered the room slowly and took positions beside it. The creatures, seeming relaxed and almost playful, simply sat watching Madrid. *What the hell do they want? It's like they're just waiting for me to die, he thought.*

Madrid's breath came in short gasps as the fourth creature slowly approached the room's entrance. He could hear the sounds of its passing now—a resonant, serpentine hiss that could only come from a creature of enormous size. A scraping

sound split the air as if sharp barbs were being dragged across the floor and walls. The smaller aliens seemed to straighten and alertly shifted their attention toward the doorway.

Madrid imagined that he felt the stale air being sucked from the room as the huge, graceful creature entered. Filling the entire doorway, the monster opened its hideous, dagger-lined jaws and shattered the tense stillness with a ferocious scream, causing Madrid to shiver with quiet panic.

The creature's head and muzzle looked similar to those of the smaller aliens, except that its eyes held a glimmer of intelligence. Its long, craning neck was covered by a massive carapace plate that had a distinctive pattern, not unlike snake-skin. The armor plates covering its enormous upper body bore a variety of spikes and jagged growths. Madrid noticed a number of barely distinguishable fractures along the length of the creature's flexing shoulder plates. As he ran his eyes over the creature's grotesque body, he made out the long, spindly arms it held tightly at its sides. The arms, which ended in razor-sharp, bony scythes, looked as if they could tear apart a solid paristeel bulkhead with ease. The most bizarre aspect of the creature was that it supported the weight of its huge upper body with a thick, snake-like tail. Just as with its plating, the tail was encrusted with spines and strange deformations. The creature's horrid appearance reminded Madrid of the terrible dragons that had filled the myths of ancient Earth.

He watched helplessly as the creature slithered slowly across the broken floor with an eerie grace. Thick, milky liquid dripped from the beast's open jaws as it lowered its great crowned head until its eyes were even with Madrid's. Its burning eyes bored into Madrid and locked him in their hypnotic stare. He could feel the creature's hot, rancid breath upon his skin.

Groaning through gritted teeth, Madrid was suddenly overwhelmed by the creature's base musings. Harsh and unintelligible at first, unmistakable impressions raced like quicksilver through his mind.

Unity... soon.

Just then, an explosion rocked the room from outside. Dust rained down from the ceiling as the ground shifted under Madrid's body. New, metallic sounds rang through the hallway.

Someone's coming, Madrid thought excitedly.

He could hear heavy clomping, like the sound of two marines, nearing the room's entrance. A wave of courage washed over Madrid, and he barely stifled a cry of joy as the two warriors appeared in the doorway. Then his blood suddenly ran cold as he saw the two silhouettes before him, and his hope of rescue disappeared as he realized that these were two Protoss warriors.

They stepped farther into the room and glared at the four misshapen aliens. The dragon-creature squinted its hellish eyes and crouched in a defensive stance, while the three smaller aliens began circling the warriors slowly, preparing to strike.

As the two Protoss squared off against the other aliens, Madrid gazed for the first time upon the beings whose ships had destroyed his homeworld, and whose forms he had seen

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only on holos before now. Their fierce eyes, which glowed like molten sapphires, were the only distinguishable features on their scaled faces. They had no mouths, ears, or noses, only a series of tribal-like, tattooed markings that ran along the harsh ridges of their cheekbones. Their heads were covered with a bone-like plating that bore a striking resemblance to the dragon-creature's armored carapace. Long, sinewy appendages flowed out from underneath the warriors' head plates and were fastened together like bands of thick hair that ran down their

slightly hunched backs. Their large, three-fingered hands were nearly concealed by archaic-looking gauntlets that pulsed with some otherworldly energy. Torso armor and shoulder plates, crafted of the same ancient technology, hid most of the warriors' upper bodies. Their long, armored legs were buckled backward at the knee, reminiscent of the cloven-hoofed devils of myth. Their strong, muscled bodies were covered by thin, wet, reptilian skin that was marked with the same strange tattoos as their faces.

Madrid looked upon the Protoss with unabashed awe and terror. These were the destroyers of worlds. These were the executioners of man. These were the dark gods, who had come at last to claim his soul.

The small, catlike aliens suddenly sprang at the two Protoss with their multiple talons and glittering fangs bared. Within a fraction of a heartbeat, burning blades of azure energy sprang forth from the warriors' gauntlets. With a blinding flash of blue fire, the first of the attacking aliens was cut down in midair by the Protoss's swift attack. The other two aliens, surprised by the savagery of the strike, attempted to slow their advance and skitter around the warriors. Yet one of the Protoss gracefully leaped ahead of the second creature and tore through its skull with his fiery blades. The other Protoss warrior, stepping in to protect his comrade's flank, outmaneuvered the third creature and split it in two with a powerful blow.

The dragon-creature's massive tail swept out and crashed into one of the warriors. Madrid watched in awe as the Protoss flew across the room and smashed into the far wall. Its limp body punched a hole through the paristeel plating, weakening the wall and causing more rubble to topple into the room from above.

Without a second glance, the remaining warrior turned to confront the dragon-creature. Madrid's eyes focused on the monster's shoulder plates, which began to heave and swell. The tiny, hairline fractures expanded and split to reveal rows upon rows of sharp, finger-sized needles. With a massive surge of stale air and a flurry of sickly squaring noises, the dragon-creature flexed its torso muscles and let loose a volley of poisoned spines from its shoulders. The spines flew toward the warrior, yet the Protoss stood his ground without even a flinch as the speeding needles shattered against an invisible barrier before they reached him.

Madrid was flabbergasted. Not one of the spines had even grazed the warrior's body. He noticed a slight blur and an azure flicker around the form of the Protoss. The warrior seemed to be protected by some sort of energy shield, but the blue light

was twinkling as though the field might have been weakened. The dragon-creature seemed to consider its next move for a moment, then fired another volley at its enemy. With the grace and skill of an acrobat, the Protoss tumbled and leaped out of harm's way, evading the spines as they tore through the reinforced wall behind him.

The dragon-creature spun around, but was too slow to react as the warrior kept tumbling and then leaped onto its armored back. The creature flailed in protest, desperately trying to buck the Protoss from its body.

Igniting his energy blades and pulling one of his arms back, the warrior seemed ready to separate the creature's head from its neck—but suddenly, one of the creature's scythe-like arms swung up and around and skewered him through the midsection. Madrid saw a weak flash of blue as the last of the warrior's shield energy dissipated. The stunned Protoss took a final desperate swing and severed the arm that was buried in his torso. Hissing in rage and pain, the creature drove its remaining arm into the warrior's armored chest. The Protoss's body, wracked with violent spasms, went limp after a final, heaving shudder. The smoldering azure light in its glassy eyes slowly faded to blackness.

Madrid was shocked by the battle's outcome. Somehow he never imagined that the dragon-creature could actually defeat the Protoss. It didn't seem real to him that the destroyers of worlds could bleed and die like any other beings. He imagined that he could feel the furious pounding of the dragon-creature's heart and taste the Protoss's bitter blood on his lips. He relished the primal joy of the creature's savage victory. *This isn't right. . . . These aren't my thoughts*, he thought to himself, on the verge of panic. Yet, as the seconds ticked away, the rage inside him began to cool.

In the wake of the fevered rush, Madrid could only stare in confusion, feeling tinges of remorse and disappointment at the warrior's death. Although he found himself strangely invigorated by the warrior's valiant efforts, he shrugged off the notion and coldly reminded himself that the warrior was a Protoss, and the Protoss were murderers. It was as simple as that. Yet, as he gazed again at the savage dragon-creature, Madrid began to doubt his understanding of the nature of murder.

The wounded beast, visibly shuddering under its heavy carapace, attempted to slither toward the room's exit. The creature abruptly stopped and turned back toward the far side of the room, snuffing at the air. Slowly, the Protoss warrior whom it had flung across the room rose from the rubble.

The Protoss's eyes scanned the room and came to rest upon the crumpled body of his comrade. The creature flexed its huge shoulders, and a hundred needles shot out at the warrior. The Protoss whirled at the sound of the expulsion and was showered by the tiny blades that tore his flesh and embedded themselves in his worn armor.

Bleeding immediately from dozens of wounds, the warrior filtered slightly as the spines' poison spread throughout his system. With grim resolve, he inched toward his enemy. The frayed dragon-creature, with no projectiles left, swung its remaining scythe-arm at the Protoss. The warrior blocked the clumsy attack and thrust his energy blade up into the beast's soft underbelly. The creature screamed in agony as the Protoss

worked his blade deeper into its shuddering body.

Madrid winced as the creature's thick, purple blood splattered around its body. His own blood surged and quickened, as if a presence inside him could sense the creature's pain and torment. *Damn Protoss butcher*, he thought bitterly.

At last, the warrior extinguished his blade and pulled it out of the creature. Though it was mortally wounded, the creature continued to thrash and hiss as it towered weakly above the Protoss. Taking hold of the creature's splintered rib cage with both hands, the warrior gave a great heave and lifted its massive girth from the ground. Madrid marveled at the warrior's strength as he flung the dragon-creature over his shoulder. The heavy body hit the floor with a wet smack and lay still.

The warrior made a solemn, signing motion with his left hand, which Madrid surmised was either a salute or a curse. Though his body was battered, he struck a defiant pose that seemed meant to impress Madrid with his courage and valor. However, Madrid only glared at the victorious Protoss as if it had butchered an innocent child.

The warrior's gaze shifted and fell upon his fallen comrade. He walked over to the mutilated body and knelt beside it. Madrid, with beads of sweat running down his fevered face, strained to see what the warrior intended. Taking hold of one of the dragon-creature's broken talons, the warrior placed it in his dead comrade's hand.

"*ENT TARO ADUN, KHAS IL'ADARE.*" A voice boomed in Madrid's head. Even though the Protoss made no audible sound, he knew it was the warrior's voice, but he was unable to understand the Protoss language. A wave of nausea rushed over him as the alien poison caused his blood to roar in his ears. Whatever was inside him was reacting violently to the Protoss's mental presence.

What's happening to me? he thought. Fearing that the Protoss could hear his thoughts as well, Madrid tried to clear his tortured mind, yet his will wasn't strong enough to block out the power of the Protoss's psyche. He watched as the warrior ceremoniously crossed his comrade's arms over his chest plate. Madrid sensed that the warrior was overcome with grief over the loss of his comrade. The Protoss seemed to wince in pain as he continued to speak.

"*Und lam lhar. Anht Zagatir nas,*" the warrior finished softly. The words had the feel of a prayer or a ritual in honor of his fallen friend. The Protoss turned his gaze toward Madrid, whose body once again began to quiver with fear.

Suddenly, without a sound to give away its passage, another Protoss entered the room with all the grace and power of an earthbound god. Madrid watched as the large Protoss made his way over to the surviving warrior and crouched beside him. There was something distinctly regal about him, something heroic in his proud stature that commanded immediate reverence. Like the warrior, the larger Protoss was heavily ornamented in archaic-looking battle armor, but it was the color of molten silver clads just before the breaking of the dawn. The armor was also inscribed with swirling, cryptic runes that seemed to pulse with power. Beneath the grand armor, the Protoss was adorned with a flowing, midnight-hued stole that reminded Madrid of a priest's mantle. The Protoss's face and skin bore the same look as the warrior's, yet

harsh lines and wrinkles around his eyes gave the impression that he was very old, marked by untold years and experiences.

Again Madrid heard the warrior's thunderous voice in his head as the two Protoss began angling with one another. The large Protoss stood up and gazed intently at the paralyzed Terran. Madrid cowered in his combat suit as the Protoss crossed the room and knelt carefully before him.

Reaching out his huge, scaled hand, the Protoss placed it gently on the Terran's forehead. Terrified, Madrid shrank away from the Protoss, but was surprised to find that the touch was warm. The Protoss closed his eyes and seemed to sink into deep meditation. A strange, tingling energy raced along Madrid's nerve endings, and he imagined a slight tugging in his brain, as if the Protoss was scanning his body and manipulating the delicate processes of his mind.

Madrid found himself unable to scream as terror overtook him once more. *This is it*, he thought to himself. The Protoss abruptly took his hand away and stood up. He walked back over to the warrior, and they conversed again. Slowly, Madrid began to comprehend the meaning of the Protoss's thoughts. He had no idea what the Protoss had done to his mind, but it allowed him to understand their thoughts just as if they were speaking his own language.

"This world is lost, Executor!" Madrid heard the warrior say. "Let us depart this place and strike elsewhere!"

The other Protoss shook his head in disagreement. "That is my decision to make, Thuras. I will not abandon this world until all our efforts have been exhausted." The one called Thuras turned and stared at Madrid, suddenly aware that his thoughts had been overheard. The warrior stood up slowly, bolder Madrid in his harsh gaze. Madrid's frayed nerves finally snapped.

"Go ahead and get it over with, you son of a bitch!" Madrid screamed. The warrior's eyes blinked in puzzlement. "I know you can understand me!" he spat at the Protoss. "Make your move, you ugly bastard!"

"My business here has nothing to do with you, Terran," Thuras said coldly. Madrid was surprised that he could understand the Protoss so clearly. He could tell that the warrior was restraining his fury. "You would do well to keep silent in my presence. Unlike some of my comrades, I have little patience for your kind." The warrior's threat was unmistakable, and despite his burning fever, Madrid felt chilled to the bone.

"Be at ease, Thuras," the other Protoss said. "This Terran is afflicted and poses no threat to you."

Thuras lowered his eyes and bowed respectfully to his superior. "Your pardon, Executor. I reacted in haste," Thuras said humbly.

"I understand, young zealot. You are wounded and have lost an honored comrade to the enemy. Yet, in your grief, you must remember that we have come here to protect the Terrans," the older Protoss said.

"With your leave, Executor, I wish to return to the battle outside. There are many comrades to be avenged this day,"

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Thuras said resolutely.

The larger Protoss nodded to him. "Go, then, with my blessings, young Thuras," he replied. "I will remain here and tend to this Terran, Khassar de Templari."

"En Taro Adan," Thuras answered, and quickly made his way out. The large Protoss turned toward Madrid and held him with his sapphire gaze, and though it lacked the disdain that emanated from Thuras's burning stare, Madrid found himself shrinking from the mighty Protoss anyway.

"You need not fear me, Terran. I am Tassadar, Executor of the Protoss fleet that has come here to protect you," he stated in a soothing voice. Madrid gritted his teeth and refused to accept the Protoss's words.

"Bullshit," he snapped. "This is just some kinda mind-job you're pulling. I've seen what you've done. I lived through it!" The Protoss looked surprised at the Terran's rage. "Don't pretend you don't know what I'm saying! You remember Chau Sara?" he shouted accusingly. "I was there when your damn fleet burned the planet down to the bedrock!"

Tassadar lowered his gaze and leaned heavily against the cold wall. The alien poison in Madrid's blood surged at the Protoss's apparent moment of weakness. The Terran screamed, "I had family on that planet, and they're dead now because of you! Is that your idea of protection?"

Tassadar paused in contemplation. He lifted his head and looked at Madrid evenly.

"You are correct, Terran," Tassadar said flatly. "My fleet did burn the world of Chau Sara. Regrettably, I was ordered to do so by the Protoss Conclave which I serve."

Murderer, the sinister alien consciousness whispered in Madrid's mind.

"Your bosses ordered you to wipe out a colony of four hundred thousand people!" Madrid hissed. "You murdered entire families that never once did you or yours the slightest harm!" He felt his temperature rising again and had to focus to stay conscious.

"You are mistaken," Tassadar replied, suddenly defensive. "The Conclave ordered me to burn the planet because it had been infested by a malignant alien presence. The culling of the Terran colonists was an unfortunate transpiration. Their lives were of little concern to my superiors, many of whom believe that the eradication of the Zerg should be paramount to any other duty. Even our duty to protect the lesser races under our care."

"Lesser races? What the hell are you talking about? What's the Zerg?" Madrid stammered. Tassadar straightened and looked up at the roof of the room as if the stars beyond it were lulling him with some unheard melody. With a start, he turned back to Madrid.

"There is so much that your people do not understand about the nature of things," Tassadar said sadly. "So much, I fear that all of your worlds will be consumed by the time you learn. The Zerg are a race of insatiable destroyers who have come from the far reaches of the cosmos. For many generations, the Zerg Swarm has ravaged its way across countless worlds, striving to

accelerate its evolution by incorporating the strongest races that it encounters. Now it has come to claim humanity as its own."

Unity, the alien presence insisted.

"I've heard them," Madrid admitted nervously. "I can hear the *voice* in my mind now."

Tassadar nodded and looked upon the Terran's fevered condition with concern.

"The Overmind. You hear the Overmind speaking to you. It embodies the collected consciousness of the Zerg Swarm. All of its . . . minions hear its call and must obey."

Madrid stared at the Protoss, letting the words sink in. "No! I would never give in to them!" he hissed. "I'm a man, not some mindless animal!"

"That distinction is now only valid for a matter of time. You know what you are becoming. You can feel the Zerg's virulent bloodlust within you now," Tassadar said bluntly. Madrid's body began to spasm uncontrollably. "Your nervous system has been infected with the Zerg's hyperevolutionary virus. Your body is processing Zerg genes and is rapidly mutating on a cellular level. In time, you will become an agent of the Swarm and will be irrevocably bound to the will of the Overmind."

Madrid's breath quickened as his body continued to shake violently. "But we never saw this Overmind or any swarm on Chau Sara!" he gasped with short breaths. His shaking was becoming more violent. "There was nothing there! I just don't understand why all those people had to die," he said weakly, lapsing into a fit of coughing.

Tassadar's brow furled in sympathy as the Terran began to spit up blood. When Madrid's fit eased, Tassadar continued.

"Although the Swarm itself had not yet reached the planet, its advance hive spores had. Your technology was unable to detect the subtle infestation, but I assure you that it was there. My superiors ordered the planet burned to prevent the infestation from spreading to any more of your worlds," Tassadar said. "Though I grieve for the loss of every Terran life on Chau Sara, I fear that many more of your kind will die if the Swarm's rampage is not stopped. The Swarm is the most dire threat that this galaxy has ever known."

"I had no idea. . . ." Madrid whispered. Tears welled up in his eyes as the true horror of his situation settled in his mind. Through the psychic link that existed between them, he could see into the depths of Tassadar's spirit and was certain of the sincerity of the Protoss's words.

"Your metamorphosis has progressed too far," Tassadar explained stoically. "I am afraid that I cannot save you. The infestation, once begun, is irreversible. However, if you wish, I can give you peace." Madrid looked into his sorrowful azure eyes and immediately understood what the offer entailed.

"I knew some Protoss bastard would kill me sooner or later," Madrid said chidingly. "I just didn't figure it'd be this sociable." Tassadar made a peculiar sound. Madrid was unsure if it was a bemused laugh or a sigh of remorse.

Madrid sucked in his last conscious breath. *So this is how it all ends*, he thought to himself. *Better this than the alternative.* He summoned up all his courage and gave a trusting nod to Tassadar. With his great hand resting gently on the human's fevered forehead, Tassadar let loose the full force of his power. Searing blue arcs of psychic fire shot out from his hand and engulfed

Madrid's limp body. The bolts surged through the Terran's limbs, burning out the invasive alien cells within his blood.

Madrid's pain was immediately washed away as he felt his consciousness slowly rise out of his body. A swirling vortex of blue, violet, and warm gold flashed before his awestruck eyes. His mind reeled, not in confusion, but in the realization that all his earthly troubles had washed away with his pains.

Reaching out with his consciousness, Madrid sensed Protoss spirits gathered around him. He became fleetingly aware of hundreds and then thousands of their minds, all scattered throughout the swirling ether that he beheld. Each of them emitted strength and nobility that beamed out of the vortex like white-hot rays of sunlight. As Madrid watched, the pure white beams began to coalesce into a single, shining band of inexplicable beauty and power. Madrid imagined the glowing band to be a great, fluid lifeline that spanned the entirety of the Protoss's existence. The mere sight of it filled his spirit with a profound bliss.

"En Taro Adun, brave Terran: *Unto the grate of Adun may your spirit soar*," Tassadar intoned reverently. He opened his eyes and looked down upon the still body of Andre Madrid. Though the Terran's body was ravaged and broken, his face shone with peace and wonderment, and Tassadar knew the Terran could no longer feel the pain of his affliction. He remained kneeling for a few moments while thin wisps of smoke drifted up from the Terran's blackened power suit. Regaining his composure, the mighty Protoss lifted Madrid's body from the broken floor. Carrying the lifeless husk as if it were a sleeping child, he walked outside into the half-light of the setting sun. ☘



about the authors

Chris Metzner (left) and Sam Moore met in the second grade and have been writing stories and creating worlds together ever since. After escaping high school, Sam went to Cal State

Fullerton while Chris landed a job at a locally based game company, Blizzard Entertainment. After a few short years, Sam had graduated with a writing degree and Chris had moved from an artist position in that of senior designer. He provided the backbone for the stories of Blizzard Entertainment's highly successful titles Warcraft II, Diablo, and Starcraft. This piece marks their first official endeavor together.



about the illustrator



Samwise Didier has had a lifelong obsession with fantasy and science fiction. When he was just a little tyke, his pop read old Conan comics to him, insuring that he would grow up to emulate the illustrative styles of artists like John Buscema and Bernie Wrightson. Despite the teachers who told him that

he'd never get anywhere drawing monsters and warriors, Sam has been the art director for Blizzard Entertainment for the past seven years and has helped to define the look and style of games such as Warcraft II, Diablo, and Starcraft. The cover and interior illustration for this issue are Sam's first published pieces outside of the game industry.



BY PAMELA SARGENT

HILLARY ORBITS VENUS

*In another "now,"
her life follows a different trajectory...
but still she rises above it all.*

"In 1963... fifteen-year-old Hillary [Rodham] wrote to NASA asking what subjects to study to prepare for becoming an astronaut. NASA wrote back that no females need apply."

—Shana Alexander,
"The Difficulties of Being Hillary,"
Playboy, January 1994

As the ship's engines reached peak acceleration and settled into a steady background drone, mission specialist Hillary Rodham sat back in her chair and thought about how her life might have been different. It was a common human tendency, she thought, to reflect on one's life aboard trains, planes, buses, and even during an interplanetary voyage aboard the *Sacajawes*, now bound for Venus.

The turning point for her, Hillary supposed, had been the letter she had received from a minor NASA functionary during her sophomore year at Maine East High School. She had written to ask how a hopeful student should go about preparing to become an astronaut. The response to her earnest inquiry had fired her imagination and given her a mission—to travel into space, to set foot on the Moon, maybe even explore Mars. The technology that had built the *Sacajawes* and the fission-to-fusion engine that powered her, one of the more recent of the technological breakthroughs that had come along in such rapid succession after the first Moon landing, had finally put those early ambitions within her reach.

For now, she could take great pride in being among the first crew of astronauts to travel to Venus. They would not, of course, actually land on that hellish world with its atmosphere of carbon dioxide and a surface temperature hot enough to melt lead. She and the other three members of the crew would have to settle for orbiting the veiled planet, doing radar mapping of the surface, and sending down two probes. The probes and detailed radar maps would contribute to their knowledge of Earth's sister planet, but the primary purpose of the mission was to test the *Sacajawes* on an interplanetary voyage.

ILLUSTRATION BY
ANITA KUNZ

If not for L. Bruce Thomerson, an assistant to a deputy director of public relations for the National Aeronautics and Space Administra-

tion, Hillary might not have been aboard this spacecraft. Another career might have claimed her—medicine, perhaps, or even law. Or, despite the urgings of a mother who had always encouraged her daughter not to limit her ambitions, she might have settled for the more conventional life of a suburban housewife in a place much like Park Ridge, Illinois, the Chicago suburb where she and her brothers had grown up.

But L. Bruce Thomerson—seized either by sympathy for her dream or perhaps merely tired of having to discourage yet another idealistic girl—had deflected her from such possibilities with his typed postscript to the form letter that had told her NASA was not interested in any female astronauts. "No females need apply to the astronaut training program now," Thomerson had added to the letter, "but that could change in years to come, and there are some signs within the Agency that it may. My advice is to work hard at your high school math and science courses and prepare yourself for college work in those subjects. Keep yourself physically fit. Consider graduate school or a career in one of the military services. Make yourself a credit to your family and community, and you might become just the kind of young woman NASA would proudly accept as one of our astronauts someday."

There had been detours along the road that had taken her to Houston and the Johnson Space Center and to Cape Canaveral, but Hillary had kept her goal in sight, determined to be among the corps of men and women who would reach for the stars. Her marriage had been one such detour—or so it had seemed for a while. She had promised herself never to completely surrender her own name and identity, to lose her life to her husband's career, yet she had come perilously close to doing that.

There had been all the usual justifications. Marriage, after all, meant compromising, even when it often seemed that it was the woman who had to make most of the compromises. Nurturing her husband, advancing his interests, and encouraging him in his work were worth a few sacrifices. Even at the worst times, she had always, partly for their daughter's sake, rejected the option of divorce. And the most important reason for staying with him, for sometimes looking the other way even when his lapses had hurt her: She loved him. Throughout all the arguments, the demands of his work and hers, the flings with other women that he had not entirely given up even after they were married, she had continued to love him. She had stuck it out, stayed the course, and again Hillary was grateful that she had, even though it had meant postponing her own dream for a while. The time had come when he had needed her, badly.

Now, aboard the *Sacajawea*, she wondered if, despite her own accomplishments, her husband's reflected glory might have tipped the scales of NASA in her favor. Hillary thought of the last press conference she and her crewmates had endured before the flight; at least a third of the questions directed to her had been about her husband. Even knowing that her qualifications were the equal of any other astronaut's, and superior to many, she still feared that she might always remain in his shadow.

Foolish, she thought, to think that way. She had never been

one for self-pity, even during the worst times. She would certainly not indulge in self-doubt while on the most important journey of her life.

THAT THE *SACAJAWEA* was going to Venus, rather than to Mars, was the reason all four of the astronauts aboard her were women. The exigencies of politics and public relations had given Hillary and her crewmates this mission, since it had seemed appropriate that the first human beings to travel to Venus—to orbit Venus, at any rate—be female. They would not be the first crew to test the fission-fusion pulse engine that powered the *Sacajawea*; an earlier version of this ship, the *Selene*, had gone to the Moon and back in two days almost a year ago, in 1997. But NASA's first all-female space crew had guaranteed even more media coverage of this mission than of the pulse engine's first test.

"Peak acceleration achieved," murmured Lieutenant Colonel Evelyn Holder, pilot, Air Force Academy alumna, and commander of this mission. Evelyn ran a hand through her short brown hair and leaned back in her chair at Hillary's left. "This baby's going to pretty much run herself from now on."

"Never thought I'd see the day," Judith Resnik said from behind Evelyn, "when we could get to Venus in less than three weeks." Judy, an electrical engineer by training, was a slender woman near Hillary's age with a cloud of thick, dark hair.

"Never thought I'd see the day," Victoria Cho muttered, "when I'd be on Oprah and get a photo shoot in *Vanity Fair*." Victoria was a geologist—or maybe "aphroditologist" was the more appropriate term for her profession during the course of this mission.

"Letterman," Judy said. "That had to be the worst, doing Letterman."

Hillary wasn't so sure about that. Exchanging sarcastic ripostes with David Letterman, schmoozing with Jay Leno, Rosie O'Donnell, and Barbara Walters, fielding questions from Ted Koppel and Sam Donaldson on "This Week With Diane Sawyer"—none of that had especially bothered her. It was the intrusiveness of many in the media, their refusal to acknowledge that she and her crewmates had any rights to privacy. During the weeks before the mission, when interest in the *Sacajawea* and her crew was building to a fever pitch, camera crews and reporters had been camping in front of her house in Houston at all hours. Worse still were the newspaper and magazine articles that, to Hillary's mind anyway, bordered on tabloid journalism. The journalists had ferreted out every personal gossip detail about her life they could find—how she had met her husband, women who claimed to have had affairs with him during the seventies, her spiritual beliefs—nothing seemed to be off limits. Even Hillary's daughter, who had done nothing to deserve such intrusiveness, other than to have the parents she did, was not spared garbled reports about her love life and parties she had attended on campus and fellow students she had allegedly dated.

Some of the questions asked of Hillary were, she felt strongly, questions no one should have to answer. She had fielded most of them, evaded the most intrusive inquiries, and consoled herself with the thought that she had fulfilled her responsibilities to NASA's public relations staff.

"Could be worse," Jerrie Cobb had told her. Jerrie, the first American woman in space and the first woman to go to the Moon, was old enough to remember when things had been worse. "Could be a lot worse if nobody cared about the space program. We'd have all the privacy we wanted then."

Hillary could not imagine people being bored by or indifferent to the space program. Her dream might have begun as a teenage girl's fantasy, but it had grown into something much larger than herself, humankind's greatest venture, something that would help make the world a better place. "We are not interested in social reconstruction," she had said in 1969, as the first student to speak at a Wellesley College commencement, "it's human reconstruction. . . . If the experiment in human living doesn't work in this country, in this age, it's not going to work anywhere."

That experiment had been working in recent years, not least because of the space program. That, along with ending the war in Vietnam, had been part of President Hubert Humphrey's legacy; being out from under Lyndon Johnson's shadow had imbued the former Vice-President with a boldness few had believed he possessed. By the time Neil Armstrong, Buzz Aldrin, and Michael Collins were on their way to the Moon in July 1969, the summer after Hillary's graduation from Wellesley, the safe withdrawal of American troops from Vietnam was proceeding rapidly. Secretary of State Eugene McCarthy was issuing optimistic announcements about the progress of peace talks several times a week. Senator Edward M. Kennedy had cut short his Massachusetts vacation to migrate between Palm Beach, Florida, and the Kennedy Space Center, making political hay by reminding people of his brother John's promise to send men to the Moon, and NASA had announced successful experiments on an ion drive and plans for building reusable shuttlecraft and a permanent space station in Earth orbit.

Hillary's young life, marred by assassinations, violence, an unpopular war, and the increasing animosity between her generation and that of her parents, had suddenly looked brighter. In the wave of good feeling induced by Secretary McCarthy's diplomatic successes and the Apollo 11 moon landing, people again looked ahead. There was even talk that NASA was at long last seriously considering the recruitment of female astronauts. The summer of 1969 had evoked in Hillary the strange and eerie feeling that a bleak future had somehow been averted, that she and her fellow Americans were at last escaping the darkness threatening to overwhelm them and moving toward the light at the end of the tunnel.

A YEAR ON VENUS, the time it took the veiled planet to make one revolution around the sun, was 224.7 Earth days. The time it took Venus to rotate once on its axis was 243 Earth days, meaning

that the period of its rotation was longer than a Venusian year.

"A seriously weird cycle, if you ask me," Victoria Cho said. "Let's face it, the whole damned planet has a major case of PMS." The geologist had apparently heard most of the one-liners about Venus. That much of the humor was sexist didn't surprise Hillary; NASA had remained a male bastion well into the seventies. Jerrie Cobb and the first group of women to train as astronauts had not been recruited until early 1977, after President John Glenn's inauguration, when even the most misogynistic guys in NASA had finally concluded that long sojourns on the planned space stations and lunar outposts almost required the presence of women.

Victoria set down her cup of coffee and gazed at the image of Venus on her laptop. "Leave it to a female," she went on, "to get the simplest things ass-backwards." This was a reference to Venus's retrograde motion, to the fact that it turned on its axis from east to west. That Uranus also rotated in a retrograde direction was ignored in that particular joke. Once Venus, the brilliant morning and evening star, had been seen as a celestial embodiment of female beauty. Now she seemed to represent, for some, female peculiarities, eccentricities, and just plain oneriness.

"I think I've heard them all by now," Hillary said. She and Victoria sat at the small table where the astronauts ate their meals. The constant thrust of the *Saenger's* engines provided the one-g gravitational effect that kept their coffee in their cups and their butts in their chairs; they would not have to deal with the weightlessness of free fall until they were in orbit around Venus.

Victoria looked up from her computer. "Look, after this trip, we'll probably each get a Venusian crater named after us."

A crater called Rodham, Hillary thought. That was something to look forward to, assuming that the NASA geologists didn't start making jokes about it.

TO PURSUE HER GOAL of becoming an astronaut had meant standing up to her father. Hugh Rodham had not been an easy man to defy. He had died almost six years ago, and Hillary still felt that loss deeply, but her father had also been a hard and unbending man.

"So," Hugh Rodham had said to her at Wellesley, "you've made up your mind about what school you're going to next fall."

"Yes," Hillary said. They were in her dormitory room, packing up her things. Her father had driven the long distance from Chicago to Wellesley to see her graduate, leaving her mother with her brothers Tony and Hugh, Jr., in Park Ridge.

"Heard you're going to some conference in Washington soon. Young leaders of the future, they called it, whatever that

**SHE HAD PROMISED HERSELF NEVER TO COMPLETELY
SURRENDER HER OWN NAME AND IDENTITY, TO LOSE HER
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means." Her solidly Republican father sounded suspicious, as if she had been invited to join some sort of leftist cabal.

"It's sponsored by the League of Women Voters, Dad." One of the reporters who had interviewed her after her speech must have told him before she could. She had decided to go, even though the event seemed designed largely for young people who aspired to political careers. She might meet some people who could one day help her at NASA. Politics had its uses.

"More money in being a doctor," he said, "than in what you plan to do." She thought of the game they had played when she was a child, when her father had tutored her in the statistical mysteries of the *Chicago Tribune's* stock quotations and had drilled her in how to choose good investments. "Going to medical school, or even law school, would make more practical sense if you have to have a career. You were talking about being a doctor all last year."

It was true. Hillary had temporarily lost sight of her goal during the tumult of 1968, with its shocking assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy and the rioting in

"Dad," Hillary said, keeping her temper in check, "I don't want to talk about politics." Politics by itself, she had finally concluded, would not solve anything. President Humphrey, with all his talk of reconciliation, would be getting nowhere without the promise of technological feats that would mark the beginning of a new age. Businesses with new technologies would create new wealth; people would lift their gaze from this small planet to what lay beyond it.

Only such a dream could rouse what was best in her species. Only the prospect of great technological advances, and the wealth they would produce for everyone, could keep her country from tearing itself apart. At last the rich and powerful might be able to reach out to the less fortunate without having to fear the loss of what they had. The wretched of the world would have a true hope of improving their lot.

"You're stubborn, Hillary," her father said. "You won't change your mind, I can see that." He had said the same thing when his once-Republican daughter had come home from college and declared herself a Democrat.

THEY HAD ARGUED ABOUT A LOT OF THINGS. SHE HAD ALMOST ALWAYS LOST THE ARGUMENTS, BUT WENT DOWN FIGHTING. NOW SHE WOULD GIVE ANYTHING TO BE ABLE TO ARGUE WITH HIM AGAIN.

Chicago during the Democratic convention, when she had gone into the city by train only to witness kids her age being beaten by police. The wounds inflicted on society by such tragedy and disorder, especially on the poor and disenfranchised who had so few to fight for their interests, were intolerable to her. She would go to medical school, perhaps at Harvard or Yale, and specialize in pediatrics. She would set up a clinic in the inner city, perhaps in one of the Chicago neighborhoods she had visited with the Reverend Donald Jones and the youth group of Park Ridge's United Methodist Church. Her patients would be the impoverished urban blacks and migrant workers for whom she and her more fortunate friends had organized baby-sitting pools and food drives.

But such musings had been only a brief detour from her long-held aim. Doing medical and biochemical research was also a way to help people, and if she became an astronaut someday, she would have a public forum—a bully pulpit of sorts—from which she could inspire others to do the good works that could change society.

"More money in being a doctor," her father repeated as he sat down on one of the beds.

"Maybe so, but I've been offered a real opportunity—I have to grab it. Things are changing, Dad."

"Things are changing, all right, and not always for the better. Dick Nixon would have had an honorable peace with victory, not this namby-pamby time-to-reach-out-and-rebuild crapola. You wouldn't have seen Nixon and Agnew acting like Humphrey and Muskie, running around the country apologizing to a lot of long-haired kids for—"

Hillary sat down next to him and put her hand on his arm. "You'll be proud of me. Where I'm going—it's a great school. I'll be one of the first women to get a degree there."

"Must not be much of a school, then. Maybe they lowered their standards."

Hugh Rodham had always belittled her and her brothers that way. "Must be an easy school you go to," he had muttered while perusing her report card of straight As. "Must not be much of a college," he had said when she was accepted at Wellesley. His words had spurred her on instead of discouraging her. She had understood what he really meant: It's hard out there. The world is a tough place, and it's my job to make you tough enough to deal with it. Being second best isn't good enough; you'd better aim high.

"Dad," she said softly, "you're talking about Caltech. I couldn't have done any better. And Caltech doesn't lower standards for anybody."

VENUS WAS A world of volcanoes. They ranged from small shield volcanoes built up slowly by repeated flows of lava to huge shield volcanoes hundreds of miles across. Some were flat-topped pancake domes with steep sides, while still others, unique to Venus, were circular coronae surrounded by rings of fractures and ridges.

"Here's the deal," Victoria Cho had explained to the reporters at the first press conference for the *Sanger* crew. "Like, some ninety percent of the surface of Venus is volcanoes. You've got a bigger variety of volcanic forms there than anywhere else in the solar system. You've got these big Hawaiian-

style jobs like Sapas Mons, and then you've got these features we call coronae that aren't like anything on Earth—the coronae are those big circular forms you see on the screen behind me. Some of them have lava flows spreading out, some have shield volcanoes inside them. Most of these coronae aren't so big, but there's a few like Artemis Corona that are way humongous—about fifteen hundred miles across. And in addition to all this serious weirdness, you've got these big impact craters that look as if somebody just plopped them down there at the last minute—the last minute in geological terms, meaning less than a billion years ago."

Victoria folded her arms. "Now, about ten percent of the Venusian surface is this terrain we call tesserae, those bizarre, rugged, deformed-looking expanses of really wrinkled land, and they're the oldest places on the surface of Venus. It's like the rest of the planet got flooded by lava from volcanoes, and the tesserae are islands. So here's what I want to know. Did the whole surface look like that once, all deformed by tectonic activity, or is it just that the tesserae are so old that they're, like, all cracked and wrinkled from age?"

As wrinkled as some old hag who's spent too much time at the beach, Hillary thought, remembering another crack she had overheard among the geologists. Volcanoes erupting from time to time, atmospheric pressure so intense on the Venusian surface that the lower atmosphere of carbon dioxide was suspected to be as much a liquid as a gas, the extreme heat, the poisonous sulfuric acid in the clouds—all of it made her think that giving female names to Venus's topographic features was appropriate. The planet seemed as angry as women ought to be after centuries of male domination that had often been as oppressive as the Venusian atmosphere. Venus could almost be seen as the planetary manifestation of a just female rage.

HILLARY FINISHED TESTING the crew's latest blood samples in the *Sagoraeus's* small laboratory, then left the lab. She was in effect the ship's doctor, given her degrees in biochemistry and the paramedical skills she had acquired during her years of training with NASA. Along with some biological experiments, she took blood tests, checked blood pressure, analyzed urine samples, monitored cardiac function, and made other medical tests and observations. She did not expect to see any signs of calcium loss or muscle atrophy until they were in orbit around Venus and again weightless, but they were not likely to be in free fall long enough for any such loss to become significant.

Hillary's cubicle was a small chamber aft that was about the size of a large closet. Inside were a narrow bed, a flat wall screen on which she could call up movies, television programs, and other visual material from the *Sagoraeus's* databases, and a sound system on which she could listen to selections from the ship's music library. She let the door slide shut behind her and stretched out on the bed, then impulsively reached inside her pocket for her devotional.

The crew of the *Sagoraeus* had been allowed to bring along a few personal items. Among the possessions Hillary had aboard were a Chicago Cubs baseball cap, some favorite photos of her daughter Chelsea Michelle, and her pocket Methodist devotional of Scriptural passages.

Hillary had been carrying a devotional with her ever since

her teen years, when Donald Jones, her church's youth minister, had opened the eyes of his privileged white charges to the unfairness and cruelty of the world. He had believed that a true Christian had to be involved with the world. Overcoming alienation, searching for and giving meaning to modern life—that was the way to redemption; doing good works and ministering to the troubled and less fortunate was her duty.

She had done what she could, venturing out of the citadels of Wellesley and Caltech to tutor children in Boston's Roxbury and Los Angeles's Watts, helping to organize a medical clinic and child care program for some of Houston's working poor. Always she had felt that she could have done more, that she had compromised, that she had often placed too much importance on worldly things. Still, if she had not taken some trouble to make what had turned out to be lucrative investments, her husband, always oblivious to petty economic concerns, would have done little to provide them with more security. The dream of space had drawn her, but also the knowledge that, as an astronaut, she would be able to touch more lives and have a greater public forum. She had drifted away from her childhood faith, but it had helped in forming her, in making her feel her obligation to others.

Her husband had never understood her spiritual beliefs, such as they were. To him, science and religion were adversaries. "I can live with doubt and uncertainty and not knowing," he had often said. "It's better to live not knowing than to have an answer that might be wrong. I don't know how you can think this whole universe is just some stage where some God is watching people struggle with good and evil. Doubting, admitting our ignorance—those are our tools as scientists."

They had argued about a lot of things. She had almost always lost the arguments, but went down fighting. Now she would give anything to be able to argue with him again. Hillary closed her eyes for a moment and felt the pain of his loss once more.

UNEDITED INTERVIEW WITH Rita Bedosky by Jane Pauley for "The Voyage of the *Sagoraeus*," report to be aired February 11, 1998 on *Dateline NBC*.

RITA BEDOSKY: You are going to edit this?

JANE PAULEY: Yes, of course.

RB: You'll have to—my friends say I'm kind of a motemouth.

JP (clears throat): We're speaking to Dr. Rita Bedosky, who was one of astronaut Hillary Rodham's closest friends when they were both graduate students at the California Institute of Technology. Dr. Bedosky is now a professor of physics at American University in Washington, D.C.

RB: Which is kind of weird, when you consider it. I always thought that if one of us was going to end up in Washington, it'd be Hillary. She was always more political than most of us.

JP: She organized the first Caltech women's group, didn't she?

RB: Sure did, and we sure as hell needed one. There were so few of us back then—we really relied on those once-a-week meetings for moral support. First it was just the grad students,

but when they started admitting women as undergraduates, we were there to look out for them. And it was Hillary who saw that we could have some valuable allies if we brought in the secretaries and office workers and the cafeteria staff and the cleaning women. With all those Caltech guys, we women had to stick together.

JP: So it was rough for you.

RB: Imagine the Pope and the Catholic Church having to deal with the first women in the College of Cardinals. We were intruding on the all-male priesthood of science. We didn't belong there, the way some saw it, or else we were freaks. It's a lot different at Caltech now, but with us, about the best you could hope for was to be treated as a kind of honorary man.

JP: Did Hillary Rodham, coming into that extremely male environment from a women's college, ever get discouraged?

RB: If she did, she never let on. Hillary was about the most together person I'd ever met, even back then. She was kind of driven, if you want to know the truth, and she knew exactly what she wanted to do. She was going to get her doctorate in biochemistry, and then she was going to teach and do medical research on calcium deficiencies and bone loss and osteoporosis, because she guessed that would give her a better shot at being an astronaut someday. And she was right, given the physiological problems the early astronauts developed on *Stylab One*, before the *Doughnut*—excuse me, *Stylab-Mir Thor*—was built. And even with a revolving space station . . . (pause)

JP: She told you back then that she wanted to be an astronaut?

RB: Yeah. It was something she basically kept to herself, but I could tell she really meant it. She'd drive up to JPL—the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena—every time she had a free moment, to see what the latest unmanned probes were sending back. Sometimes she was with her husband, when he was doing some consulting there, but other times she went by herself. Met some important people there, too—like I said, she was always more political than the rest of us.

JP: You were with Hillary when she met her husband, weren't you?

RB: Oh, yeah. That was in the spring of 1970. Hillary and I were sitting in the Greasy—in the cafeteria, having some coffee. He was sitting at a table near us with some other students, talking and occasionally beating out a rhythm on the tabletop with his hands—he played the bongo drums, you know—and he kept staring at Hillary. This wasn't the first time, either. About a week before, in the library, he was staring at her, too. I remember wondering why, because Hillary wasn't really his type—he was more into California blondes, your basic babe type. Hillary had started lightening her hair some, but about all she ever wore were sweatshirts and jeans or loose dresses with Peter Pan collars, and she was still wearing thick Coke-bottle glasses, but obviously he must have noticed *something* that interested him. So he's staring at her, and she's staring right back.

JP: And then what happened?

RB: Hillary said, "I'm going to go over and speak to him," and before I could say anything, she got up and walked over and said to him, "Look, if you're going to keep staring at me and I'm going to keep staring back, I think we should at least

know each other. I'm Hillary Rodham." And then she put out her hand.

JP: Hillary's daughter told me that he used to tell that story to their friends.

RB: I think that's what got to him, that Hillary had that much charisma and just came right up and introduced herself. So he said, "Well, I'm Dick Feynman." But of course she already knew that.

"THAT'S CHELSEA WITH her aunt Joan, Dick's sister," Hillary said to Judy Resnik as the other woman sat down on Hillary's bunk. "And this photo was taken during her freshman year at MIT." Chelsea Michelle Feynman strongly resembled her father, with the same lean body, unruly hair, and slightly goofy smile. There was so little of Hillary in her daughter that it was almost as though she had been no more than a receptacle and incubator for her husband's seed, as medieval physicians had believed women were.

"And she's going into physics," Judy said, "just like her father and her aunt Joan. It must run in the family."

"Dick was a great father," Hillary said. "He liked being a father so much that he wanted another child right away. We kept trying, and we were thinking of adopting when . . ." She paused. Even after all those years, she found it painful to remember that time. "He'd be so proud of Chelsea now," she finished. Her daughter, she knew, had saved her marriage.

EDITED PORTION OF interview with Daria Derrick by Deborah Norville for *Inside Edition*, to be aired February 12, 1998.

DARIA DERRICK: It was after Hillary moved into Dick's house. Supposedly she was still sharing an apartment with her friend Rita, but that was just for cover—everybody knew she was living with Richard Feynman.

DEBORAH NORVILLE: He'd broken up with you by then?

DD: Oh, yeah. Not that we were ever really going together. Dick was a real Lothario. I always knew he wasn't serious about me, but . . . (pause).

DN: Yes?

DD: When I was with him, when he was focusing all his attention—all that high-powered genius—on me, it was like I was the only woman in the world. He might have been this Nobel Prize-winning physicist, but he was also a very sexy guy.

DN: So you went over to his house to get something you'd left there.

DD: Yeah, and Hillary answered the door. She'd only been living with him for a couple of months, but she already looked different—her hair was a lot blonder, for one thing, and she was wearing contact lenses. She was definitely looking more like a California girl—probably thought that was the way to keep him interested.

DN: Richard Feynman had a lot of unhappiness in his personal life, didn't he?

DD: You can say that again. I still remember the night he pulled out this old battered suitcase with all these old letters and photographs from his first wife—Arlene, the one who died in the forties from tuberculosis. I realized then that I could never be what she was to him, or what his third wife had been to him, either. He never talked much about his second wife.

DN: The one who divorced him during the fifties on the grounds of mental cruelty?

DD: The one who claimed he drove her crazy with his bongo drums and with doing calculus problems in bed. I think he knew that marriage was a mistake, but Arline—Arlene—Arlene was always going to be perfect in his mind, because she passed away so young. And Gweneth, his third wife—if she hadn't died in that car accident, I think he would have stayed happily married to her. She was really good for him. That's what one of his old friends told me, anyway—she loved him, but she was sort of independent-minded, too. Maybe that's what attracted him to Hillary. I think maybe he married her to keep her from moving out. She wanted a serious relationship, and I guess he was ready for marriage again by then.

DN: Did Hillary tell you that herself?

DD: Oh, no. She didn't talk about personal stuff with anybody, and I wasn't exactly her bosom buddy. I mean, she had to have known Dick had a roving eye, but she must have forgiven him for it. After all, she was married to one of the most brilliant men in the world, and that's worth more than monogamy, isn't it?

"I'M GETTING MARRIED," Hillary said to her parents over the phone.

"Who's the lucky young man?" her mother asked.

from the Ozarks, I couldn't be more surprised." Hugh Rodham heaved a sigh. "You're of age. I can't stop you. I just hope you know what you're doing."

"You will finish your doctorate, won't you?" her mother asked. "You won't drop out."

"Of course I'll finish it," Hillary replied. Her marriage, unlike that of her parents, would be a true partnership, a relationship of equals, a meeting of minds. It occurred to her only later that being the wife of Richard Feynman would automatically give her a status it might otherwise have taken her years to attain.

"SHIT," VICTORIA CHO said, not for the first time.

Hillary floated up from her chair as the *Sagittarius* fell around Venus. They had been in free fall for almost thirty-six hours now, and had launched the two probes, one toward the area of Maxwell Montes, the other toward an unusual volcano near Artemis Chasma. Both probes had failed less than an hour after entering the atmosphere.

Over by the viewscreen above the pilot's station, Evelyn Holder was listening to Sally Ride, the capcom for this mission. "The imaging team isn't happy about the probes, either," Sally was saying, "but we'll still have the radar mapping, and the most important thing is everything else is nominal, everything else is A-OK."

The *Sagittarius* had begun to decelerate on schedule, gradu-

**"LOOK, IF YOU'RE GOING TO KEEP STARING AT ME
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Barely pausing for breath between sentences, Hillary explained that she was going to marry a man who was almost thirty years older than she was and that this would be his fourth marriage, quickly adding that he was the world-renowned physicist Richard Feynman, that he had worked on the Manhattan Project to develop the first atomic bomb during World War II, and that he had won the 1965 Nobel Prize in physics for his work in quantum electrodynamics.

A long silence ensued. "He's a Jew, isn't he?" her father said at last.

"Well, yes. He's from a Jewish family. Dick's not very religious, though. If you must know, he's basically an atheist." Hillary heard her mother sigh. "We want to get married before the fall semester starts, and I hope you'll both come out here for the wedding. Dick's mother and sister will be there, too, but we're not making a big fuss."

"A physicist," her father said, still sounding too bewildered to get really angry. "Probably an absent-minded professor."

"He won the Nobel Prize, Dad."

"There's money in that, isn't there? Did he put it into some good investments?"

"He used some of it to buy a beach house in Mexico."

"Well, Hilary, if you'd told me you were marrying some hillbilly

ally slowing during the second leg of their journey to Venus. They had been orbiting Venus for less than an hour before congratulatory messages were coming in from the President and the two surviving former Presidents, John Glenn and Robert Dole.

"Everything's A-OK," Victoria muttered, "except for the fucking probes. I was really looking forward to what those babies might tell us."

Hillary drifted over to the disappointed geologist. "Look at it this way," she said. "At least you weren't the poor bastard who had to go to the Kremlin and give Commander Lebed the bad news." The Russians had designed and built the two probes. "And there's bound to be another Venus mission before too long, with everything going this well."

Victoria smiled, then propelled herself toward the small screen showing the radar imaging of the Venusian surface. Hillary's stomach lurched, then grew calmer. Evelyn was apparently over the worst of her spacesickness. Victoria, also trained as a pilot, would not have to bring them home.

They were all falling inside the *Sagittarius* as the ship fell around Venus. Hillary found herself thinking of how Dick had explained gravity to the five-year-old Chelsea with a long stick and two lead balls dangling from a slowly twisting fiber.

Dick had not been the kind of father that Hugh Rodham had been to her; she could not imagine her own father crawling around on the floor with her or telling her detailed stories about an imaginary world of people so small that they could live in the cracks of wooden planks. "Remember, kiddo," Dick had said to his daughter in what Hillary always thought of as his Brooklyn cab driver's voice, "there's always plenty of room at the bottom of things. You'd be amazed how much room there is, as long as something's tiny enough." Hugh Rodham, with his reverence for authority, would never have told her what Dick had told Chelsea about her arithmetic. "I don't care what the teacher told you," he had said. "There isn't just one right way to figure out the answer, there's a lot of ways. You want to solve the problem, you gotta try to do it different ways and see what works. If it isn't the teacher's way, so what?" Sometimes, after delivering yet another criticism of accepted wisdom, he would stare at Hillary, as if daring her to object.

She knew he considered her stodgy and conservative. He could indulge his curiosity by skinny-dipping in Esalen's hot tubs, attending an est conference on quantum field theory, or

conflict of interest. She was free to teach her classes and do her research without having to feel that those she worked with might be comparing her more conventional mind with the brilliance of her husband's.

"It's STILL EXPERIMENTAL eye surgery," Hillary had told Dick one summer evening in 1977 as they sat on a Mexican beach with Chelsea, "but I've read all the medical studies. With photorefractive keratotomy, there is a risk—I could end up with even worse vision—but there's about a two-thirds chance of ending up with twenty-twenty vision, and even twenty-forty would be good enough."

He was listening to her with his characteristic mixed expression of curiosity and amusement. "Is it worth it?" he asked.

"Well, it isn't cheap."

"I wasn't asking about the cost, I was asking about the risk. Is it worth taking the chance and spending all that dough just so you won't have to wear contacts?"

Hillary watched as their three-year-old daughter patted down another section of a sand structure that was beginning to

AS SHE SWAM WEIGHTLESSLY TOWARD THE STARBOARD SIDE, HILLARY REMEMBERED HOW HER HUSBAND HAD FLOATED ABOVE THE CONSTRAINTS THAT BOUND OTHERS.

floating around in a sensory deprivation tank, but somebody had to deal with practical matters. Someone had to study what investments to make, make certain Dick got paid what he deserved for his lectures, consulting jobs, and books, and placate the Caltech administrators and faculty he annoyed with his refusal to tend to the mundane and distracting business of writing grant proposals and attending faculty meetings. Someone had to take care of all that if he was to be free to ponder the nature of the universe. She had been, to use a metaphor drawn from her Methodist youth, the Martha to his Mary.

He was a child, still free to question and wonder, a child who was a genius, who outshone even the brilliant minds of his Caltech colleagues. As she swam weightlessly toward the *Sacajawea's* starboard side, Hillary remembered how her husband had floated above the constraints that bound others. A partnership, a bond between equals—that was the kind of marriage she had sought, but it was clear from the start that Richard Feynman had few mental equals.

It was a privilege, an honor, to be married to such a genius. Sometimes she had believed that. At other times, she had seen it as the kind of rationalization women had always grasped at for consolation.

After acquiring her Ph.D., Hillary had accepted a position in the biology department of UCLA, content to be removed from the more competitive, high-powered, and intellectually demanding atmosphere of Caltech. It was easier to use her political skills to manage the practical side of Dick's career while being on the faculty of another university, if only to avoid

look like a cyclotron. "That isn't why I want the surgery," she murmured. "NASA wouldn't accept anybody as neansighted as I am for astronaut training. If the operations are successful, I'll have a chance."

That was the first time she had confessed her long-held ambition to him. President John Glenn's recent speech, in which he had recanted the testimony he had given before a Congressional committee in 1962, had made her old dream flower inside her once more. "I argued back then," the President had said, "that women shouldn't go into space, that it was the job of men to take risks exploring the unknown. As my wife and daughter recently reminded me, I can be mighty shortsighted for a guy who used to be a pilot. It's time for women to join men in exploring the frontier of space."

"We'd have to move to Houston if they accepted me," Hillary went on, "but any university in Texas would jump at the chance to have you on the faculty. They'd probably pay you a lot more than Caltech."

Her husband said, "Let's see how your eye surgery goes first." That night, he ran for the bathroom in their beach house and vomited. That autumn, still recovering from the first operation on her left eye, she finally persuaded him to consult his doctor, who found nothing. In the spring of 1978, with twenty-twenty vision in her left eye and her right eye healing rapidly, Hillary finally got him to a specialist recommended by her colleagues at UCLA.

Dick had a tumor of the abdomen. The surgeon who operated on him told her it was myxoid liposarcoma, a rare form of cancer that had already destroyed his spleen and one of his kid-



neys. He had an eleven- to forty-one-percent chance of surviving five years, depending on which study she looked at. It was highly unlikely that he would live another ten years.

Hillary forced herself to ignore two possibilities, neither of which she would ever mention to him. The first was that his work at Los Alamos on the atomic bomb might have been responsible for his disease. The second was that, had she not been so preoccupied with her eye surgery and her applications and interviews with NASA, she might have noticed the slight bulge at his waist earlier, might have pushed him into seeing the physicians and specialists soon enough for them to have saved him.

HILLARY HAD NOT dreamed of her husband for some time, but now, drifting between sleep and wakefulness as the *Sagan* orbited Venus, she found herself standing on a sunlit beach, watching him as he waded in the surf. She had dreamed of him almost every night right after his death, and the dreams had convinced her that he was still alive, that the recurring tumors and the second rare type of cancer that had struck at his bone marrow and the failure of his remaining kidney had never happened, had been mistaken diagnoses, until she woke up and once again remembered.

Everything she knew, all the research she had done, was powerless to help him. That he had lived for another ten years after his diagnosis had been beating the odds. What had kept him going was his work, his feeling that there was still so much to teach and to learn, so many more ways to find and use the language of mathematics to convey the simple and beautiful laws of physical reality.

She had withdrawn her application to NASA, devoting herself to making his remaining time as carefree as possible. The thought that NASA might be unlikely to welcome as an astronaut a woman who would disrupt the life of a stricken man, especially a man who was one of the world's greatest physicists, crossed her mind for only a moment, and made her despise herself for thinking it.

"You know," he had told her a few years before his death, "I don't think we'd still be married if we didn't have Chelsea. There wouldn't have been enough to hold us together." Cruel as the statement seemed, she knew it to be the truth. Rooted in conventionality, toiling at her own work and taking care of all the practical matters he saw as distractions, she knew that they had begun to drift apart even in the earliest days of their marriage. Having their daughter had linked his quicksilver brilliance to her stolidity; he had loved Chelsea enough to feel some love for Hillary again. She could look at their child and see what she herself might have become growing up in a different world, a world of sun and sand and a father who could reveal the wonder and beauty of that world.

After his death, she gave him the simple burial he had wanted, with no ritual and only herself, their daughter, and Dick's sister and one of his cousins to mourn him at the graveside. A month after that, his friends and colleagues at Caltech held a memorial gathering in his honor. Hillary found herself in a large auditorium packed with fellow physicists, graduate students, former students, engineers from the Jet Propulsion Laboratory, old girlfriends, and eccentrics Dick had met on the

beach or in bars and cafes while playing his bongo drums. The written eulogy she had prepared suddenly seemed inadequate; it was conventional, sentimental, stodgy—all the things her husband was not.

She was to be the first to speak. She left her written remembrance on her chair, she would speak from his heart.

Chelsea watched her with Dick's eyes as Hillary walked to the podium, looked into the sea of faces, and said, "Toward the end of Dick's life, my dear husband and I used to talk about—pardon the cliché—the meaning of life. I can think of nothing more appropriate now than to offer some of his own remarks on that topic." He had voiced such sentiments often enough, and the outlook they expressed was so central to his life, that she could easily recall his words. "He would say, 'I have approximate answers and different degrees of certainty about things, but I'm not totally sure of anything and there's a lot I don't know, such as whether it means anything at all to ask why we're here. But I can live with that, and die with it, too. I'm not scared by not knowing, by being in a universe without any purpose, and as far as I can tell, that's how it is. It doesn't frighten me. I'd rather admit I don't know than grab at some answer that might be wrong.'"

Hillary paused, afraid for a moment that she might cry again. "That was how he lived his life, and that's what he believed right up to the end." The certainties of her Methodist youth were of little use now; Dick would have been furious at her and disappointed in her if she had invoked them. Over the years, some of his doubt and uncertainty had crept into her view of the universe. Her occasional prayers and Scriptural readings were more a nostalgic reminder of a comfort her spiritual beliefs had once provided than an affirmation of faith. She wondered if she ever would have come to that kind of agnosticism without her husband's influence. Against everything she had been taught in childhood, she could even believe that her doubts might have made her a better person. There had always existed in her a tendency toward self-righteousness; doubt made her more conscious of her failings.

Hillary bowed her head. She would honor her husband's memory by not praying for him.

HILLARY STRAPPED HERSELF into her seat. "I don't know about you," Evelyn said from her pilot's seat, "but I'm a little scared." It was an admission none of them would have made had any male astronauts been present. The ship's drive might fail, stranding them in orbit around Venus. The *Sagan* might accelerate until the midpoint of their return journey and never decelerate. If the mission failed, it would almost make certain that they would all have Venusian geological features named after themselves, which wasn't exactly consoling.

"Maybe someday, people will settle Venus," Chelsea had told Hillary in a phone call from MIT a couple of months ago.

"No way," Hillary had said. "You'd need a completely different planet."

"That's what I meant, Mom." Chelsea had gone on to speak of terraforming—engineering algae to seed the sulfuric clouds, finding a way to shield Venus from the sun so that it could cool,

HILLARY ORBITS VENUS

maybe even using the nanotechnology Richard Feynman had envisioned, twenty years before there was even a name for that field, to

build microscopic machines capable of altering the planetary environment on a molecular level. Hillary had suddenly wished that Chelsea's father could have seen what his daughter had become, how much of him there still was in her.

She was suddenly overwhelmed by a vision of Venus as a future home for humankind. A terraformed Venus would not isolate colonists and their descendants from Earth, as a colonized Mars would through the necessary adaptation to a much lower gravity. People would come and go freely. She remembered all the stories of Venus she had read as a girl, from the swampy planet of the earliest tales to the vision of hell transformed into a new garden.

"All systems go," Evelyn murmured. "Girls, we're ready to roll." For a moment, Hillary had the sensation of being outside herself, as though everything around her were no more than a dimly imagined possibility that had never come to pass, and then the thrust of the *Sagittarius*' engines pressed her against her seat.

They were on their way home—but with the success of this mission, Hillary was sure that Earth would not remain humankind's only home for long. The Moon's research outposts would soon welcome settlers, and there would be Mars to explore. As Venus shrank on the rear view screen, Hillary recalled the fifteen-year-old girl in Park Ridge who had dreamed of becoming an astronaut, and knew that in spite of the setbacks and delays, the years of postponing her dream and finally winning a place as an astronaut and then of waiting for a chance at a mission, that all of the hard work and the sacrifices and the disappointments had been worth it.

She had kept faith with her younger self.

EVELYN HOLDER HAD brought her husband to the White House reception and dinner in honor of the four astronauts. Judith Resnik was accompanied by Senator Bob Kerrey, who was rumored to be getting more serious about her; if he did decide to run for President, having an astronaut as a wife could only help. Victoria Cho had her good friend Ellison Onizuka, fellow astronaut and space station veteran, in tow.

Hillary stood with her daughter, smiling and nodding as she shook hands and exchanged pleasantries with the other guests. Chelsea Feynman, who had given up her usual uniform of jeans and sweatshirts for a long blue silk dress, was holding the medal that the President had presented to Hillary. She proudly opened the small box to show the medal to the Vice-President, as she had earlier when former President Glenn had asked to see it.

"You know," the Vice-President was saying, "I truly envy your mother. I would have loved to have been an astronaut myself. You should be very proud of your mother."

"I am," Chelsea said.

Hillary smiled as the Vice-President turned over her medal to read the inscription on the back; he was both a space policy wonk and a big supporter of NASA, so she had resolved to be as pleasant to him as possible, despite his reputation as something of an opportunist and a hatchet man for the President. At

any rate, Vice-President Newt Gingrich seemed on his best behavior tonight.

"To Hillary Rodham Feynman," Vice-President Gingrich read from the medal, "for the courage she has shown in the exploration of space." He beamed at her and her daughter. Hillary remembered how, a year after Dick's death, she had impulsively added his last name to her own on her application to NASA. In public, she was still known by her own name, the name she had kept throughout her marriage, but in NASA's records and any awards she received for her service as an astronaut, she would always be listed as Hillary Rodham Feynman. Her feminist soul was at peace with that; her husband, perhaps in more ways than even she realized, had helped to make a better space program possible. His consultations with the NASA scientists and engineers at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory, she was sure, had saved the space agency many mistakes, perhaps even disasters.

The First Lady, taller in person than she seemed on TV and with a mass of attractive curly brown hair, bore down on them, apparently about to rescue Hillary and Chelsea from the Vice-President. Mary Steenburgen Clinton might give the appearance of a soft-spoken Southern lady, but it was widely believed that her husband might never have risen to become President without her. Not long after marrying the up-and-coming young Arkansas politician William Jefferson Clinton in the early eighties, Mary Clinton had given up a promising career as an actress to become her husband's closest advisor and unofficial campaign manager. A charming but disorganized, undisciplined, skirt-chasing, and only intermittently successful politician had gone on to win election as his state's governor, as a senator, and finally as President in 1992. Mary Clinton's gentle demeanor, it was said, was only part of a public performance that concealed a sharp political intelligence and the well-honed instincts of a female Machiavelli.

"That Bill Clinton was always a right smart young feller," one of the President's old mentors from Arkansas had said in a television interview, after President Clinton had won a second term by a landslide, "but it was Mary who done whipped him into shape." Hillary could well believe that. President Bill Clinton, despite his many accomplishments in office, struck her—in his public persona, anyway—as the kind of charming rogue, weak at the center, who might never have won over the American public had he not been preceded in his office by the upright John Glenn and the dour Bob Dole. He could be grateful that people had grown tired of such rectitude and now wanted to enjoy the fruits of prosperity with a more congenial and lax chief executive.

"Ms. Rodham," Mary Steenburgen Clinton murmured as she shook Hillary's hand, "I am so glad you and your daughter could both be with us. I must tell you that of all the dinners we've had in the White House so far, I have looked forward to this one the most."

Hillary very much doubted that, but the sincerity and warmth in the First Lady's voice was enough to win her over. "You gave a wonderful performance in *Time After Time*," she responded. "It's one of my favorite films."

"That British dude who played H. G. Wells in it wasn't bad, either," Chelsea added.

Hillary glanced at her daughter, who probably didn't know that it was widely rumored that Mary Steenburgen Clinton had been romantically involved with her leading man in that movie, which had been made before her marriage to Bill Clinton, but the First Lady was still smiling.

"Malcolm McDowell, you mean," Mary Clinton said. "No, he wasn't bad at all."

This President and his wife had a reputation for informality, and people were already moving toward the entrance to the dining room in no discernible order. Hillary lingered near her daughter, who was answering Ms. Clinton's queries about her postgraduate work and her life in Boston, uncertain of what to do now, when she felt a hand gently touch her elbow.

"Ms. Rodham?"

Hillary turned and found herself looking up into the eyes of the President of the United States. He had shaken her hand impersonally at the earlier ceremony, when the members of the Venus mission had been presented with their medals, but now his gaze was definitely focused on her. With that broad grin and that twinkle in his eye, she could almost believe that he was flirting with her, unlikely as that was with his wife standing nearby.

"Mr. President," Hillary said.

Bill Clinton took her right hand and pressed it between both of his. "You and your sister astronauts have accomplished a wonderful thing," he said, "traveling to Venus and back. I've always had great admiration for brave and brilliant women, and it's a privilege to have you all as our guests."

He was a charmer, all right.

Their eyes locked . . . and then the moment passed.

The President moved away and gracefully took the First Lady's arm.

Chelsea glanced at Hillary and smiled.

Hillary followed her daughter toward the White House dining room, where the tables waited beneath the glittering chandeliers. ♀

about the author



Pamela Sargent has won the *Nebula Award* and the *Locus Award*. Her most recent novel, *Climb the Wind: A Novel of Another America*, was released by HarperPrism in January. She also collaborated with artist Ren Miller on *Firebrands: The Heroines of Science Fiction and Fantasy*, published by Thunder's Mouth Press in 1998.

Sargent's science fiction novels include *The Golden Space*, *The Alien Upstairs*, *Earthseed*, *Venus of Dreams*, and *Venus of Shadows*. She also has edited several anthologies, including the *Women of Wonder* series of science fiction by women.

She currently is working on *Child of Venus*, the third novel in her Venus trilogy, to be published by HarperPrism.

about the illustrator



Anita Kunz's clients include *Time Magazine*, *Rolling Stone*, *The New York Times*, *Q*, *Sony Music*, and *Random House Publishing*. She frequently conducts workshops at universities and institutions, including the Smithsonian in Washington, D.C. She has been honored with many prestigious awards and her paintings and sculptures have appeared in galleries worldwide. Her works are in the permanent collections at the Library of Congress and Musée Militaire de France in Paris.

WHAT REALLY HAPPENED

A number of characters in "Hillary Orbits Venus" are obviously based on real people. Here is what happened in our world (prejudicially known as "the real world") to some of them:

Judith Resnik and Ellison S. Onizuka were mission specialists who died aboard the space shuttle *Challenger* when it exploded seventy-three seconds after takeoff from Cape Canaveral on January 28, 1986.

Jerrie Cobb was one of thirteen women pilots who passed all of NASA's rigorous tests for astronauts in 1960, before NASA made the decision to accept only men with experience as military test pilots into the astronaut corps. Cobb testified at congressional hearings in 1962 in favor of accepting women into the astronaut program, but sixteen years passed before women became astronauts in the U.S.; in 1983, Sally Ride became the first American woman in space. For the past thirty-six years, Jerrie Cobb has been a pilot flying seeds and medical supplies to people living in remote areas of the Amazon rain forest, and has been nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize.

Senator Edward M. Kennedy was not in Florida during the flight of Apollo 11, but in Massachusetts, where he was involved in a car crash near Chappaquiddick that resulted in the death of a former Kennedy campaign worker, Mary Jo Kopechne.

Richard Feynman's last public service was as a member of the presidential commission appointed to investigate the causes of the *Challenger* disaster. His testimony at a hearing on February 10, 1986, in which he demonstrated the lack of resiliency in the *Challenger's* O-rings at low temperatures by dropping a piece of the material used to manufacture them into ice water, dominated that day's news reports of the commission's findings. He died on February 15, 1988, with his wife, Gweneth Howarth Feynman, at his side; they were the parents of two children, Carl and Michelle. *Infinity* (1996), a motion picture about Feynman's early years and his marriage to his first wife, Arline Greenbaum, featured Matthew Broderick in the role of the young Richard Feynman.

Mary Steenburgen was born and grew up in Arkansas. In 1980, she won an Academy Award as Best Supporting Actress in *Melvin and Howard* and married Malcolm McDowell, her costar in *Time After Time*; they were divorced ten years later. Active in politics, she campaigned for Bill Clinton in 1992. She is now married to actor Ted Danson; President Clinton and Hillary Rodham Clinton were guests at the Steenburgen-Danson wedding.

—Pamela Sargent



*Blake was a man who made his own
breaks, up to the point where the breaks
made him more than a man.*

Hieratic Realignment

THE DAMAGED BUT STILL VIGOROUS, ever hopeful Blake felt that he had as good a chance at the job now as anyone. Why not? It was simultaneously highly specialized and general to the extreme. One would have to come to this with open credentials. Very few jobs like this existed, after all. The qualifications were ambiguous, and the number of such sects quite limited.

Blake, shiftless in so much of his life's occupation but dedicated to spiritual order and with odd, unpredictable flashes of religiosity, knew that he had the qualifications. Who could make a better case?

THE CIRCUMSTANCES were stark, everyone knew them, and he had researched them assiduously. After the death of the

childless Grand Rabbi, after the immediate interment of that Rabbi, factionalism had overtaken the order and beneath that factionalism an unswerving, uncancelable doubt. This doubt had afflicted the old members, quite paralyzed them, made them unable to move on a successor. In fact, the excited disputants were utterly unable to reach any accommodation. The conflicts were evident: Most believed that the Rabbi was, as he had indicated in his last years (with a little last-year encouragement from his supporters), the Messiah and he would therefore be shortly returning for the beginning of the thousand days. All the biblical and Talmudic evidence had pointed to him, and the Messianic faction had brought the weight of scholarly text to bear, had promulgated their view in bumper stickers and posters hailing the "King Messiah." He was the Grand Rabbi, after all, and whatever he had promised—no matter how ostensibly incongruous—was Truth. Did the Torah itself not contain apparent contradictions? The believer's job was to accept, not necessarily to understand. *Ne'aseh v'nishmah* lay at the very foundation of the religion.

But a scholarly minority, bringing a conflicting set of biblical and rabbinic citations, finally held that the Rabbi must have seen something on his deathbed that had catapulted him toward his grievous end. He had been a great man, yes, a teacher and a visionary, but had succumbed to the very human and ordinary fate of delusion and guilt toward the end. Illness besets rich and poor, Rabbi and disciple alike. The sooner, then, that he was dismissed from consideration, the sooner the sect could get started on the selection of a new leader. This would be best for all of them, and that new leader, no Messiah at all, would be a practical man willing to sort out financial and geographical obstacles that had never been addressed by the Rabbi for the long, final years of his primacy.

For the Rabbi in those last years had made it known that he was wholly uninterested in temporal matters; he simply could not be bothered by such concerns. He muttered about "freedom to oppression" and quoted extensively from Isaiah 53. He dreamed, and from his bed would share his powerful dream: the ark of the golden covenant, the blast of the goat tied with

BY BARRY N. MALZBERG

ILLUSTRATION BY GREG SPALENKA

ropes and thrown from the highest terrain in praise of the Lord. Sounding then the gong of smooth and absolute judgment. From his long and inconstant dying he had returned with gasping, jeweled visions for his followers, small and precious glimpses of the times to come. A man would come, a redeemer, different from all they had imagined. A soul concealed by a disguise so powerful, so perverse as to test the faith of the most committed. He had confided those visions in whispers to his followers. Most had clasped hands in trust; but opponents had found that they lacked real assurance, that the visions suffered from a lack of conviction, which could only attack their credibility.

So the anti-Messianists, buttressed by the weight and wisdom of ancient lore and less credulous or more ambitious, felt that the Rabbi was stone or decomposition, ashes or dust, but in no case fit for return. The Messianic code that would help the Rabbi move on from the grave to assume a commanding spot seemed to have been exposed as an essential market position, and it was time to move on. The factions quarreled, despised one another, deplored their opponents' misguidance, engaged in arguments that occasionally became physical, even brutal, although there were no known fatalities. In the meantime, some five perilous and unhappy years after the death of the Rabbi, the order—all of its factions—remained almost wholly paralyzed.

THEREFORE, BLAKE thought, stumbling along Eastern Parkway, righting himself with the help of garbage cans, scattering pigeons and memory as he lurched toward headquarters, therefore here was vacancy without occupation. He was getting right down to the possibilities when he had studied the newspaper stories months ago and had fixed his sights on this beauty spot for an enterprising guy, the kind of situation to which an enterprising man could bring some real clarity. Here was possibility and a clear career path once he had established his redemptive or visionary powers. Of course it would help if he could work a modest miracle or two. The job, once accepted, would embody everything that evolved late-century concepts of advancement properly deplored. The sect had no use for women, less for the secular world from which the women could protect them. Also and encouragingly, the sect had little tolerance for premature decisions on the issue of Resurrection or even decisions of any kind.

Reason enough for a more sensible Blake, a Blake transmogrified, to have stayed away. But he had reached that careless and unachieved stage, the resting place after all the caroms of unachievement, when whether they like it or otherwise, you had to take your shot. Blake figured that he was as good as anyone, as likely a candidate. On his side was ignorance both of particular text and sacred order; absence of principle should also count for something. The Rabbi's mutterings had been sufficiently vague to accommodate the least likely candidate—someone of no scholarly or even religious background.

Against him, of course, were those remnants of the order who would take no substitutes, allow for no spare parts, and accept nothing short of another ultra-Orthodox Jew of profound Talmidic prowess. It would recognizably be the Rabbi come to part the waters, or it would be no one.

Blake considered this part of the challenge, the most imposing of the obstacles he would have to overcome. Part of ascension, after all, was the dispersion of obstacles, and nowhere in human history, on Earth as in Heaven, was there a religion without its

parables of submersion, loss, suffering, and final victory. Blake was in his small way a scholar; he had surveyed the situation carefully.

No, Blake was not a frivolous man. A gravitas pervaded his worldview and appearance, cast shadows over his five feet six inches, his bald skull, his solemn, stalling demeanor. Once, before he had found the tighter focus of these recent years, he had dreamed of women all the time, had dreamed of women tempting him with their posture and their private parts, women pressing against the enthralled Blake organ and bringing it to raging, inconstant life. Blake moaned just thinking about it, remembering those days, that imagined sensation, uttered little carnal cries of submission, each of those cries seeming to drive him more deeply into his own accommodation, his own obsession.

Blake's soul often seemed to be raw with dripping paint, with rediscovery and constancy, but the failed relationships, the miserable and misguided women of a lifetime had brought him to a grim awareness of women's treachery: sex as nature's enormous cheat, carnality's commanding giggle as it overcame the sensibilities of earnest men such as himself. O the prized and unpriced practice of celibacy! Blake had often thought. Possessed of fortune by inheritance, stripped of desire by harsh encounter, granted lifetime security by certain meaningful convulsions in foreign currency, the disenchanted, sex-suspicious, but always ambitious Blake had been independently wealthy and unattached for many years, ready to seek a meaningful full-time position that now, with the controversy over the succession, seemed at least possible, worth pursuit. Blake had ideas. Whispers of the second coming, hints and glimmers of celestial transport had combed his nights since adolescence. Becoming the Messiah was your best bet, overall, to make sense out of this mystery.

The idolatrous Blake took public transportation to the headquarters of the sect, after all this consideration. He managed to talk his way past colorfully garbed but otherwise ineffective security personnel and found himself, after some florid dialogue, at the entrance to the building. Stern security forces possessed only marginally motivated figures, many of them easily as bitter as he. Eager to find some equilibrium and a sponsor, Blake at last faced representatives of the riven sect. All of them, old and young, flushed or beardless, bearded or decrepit, were tensely curled into positions of certain defiance.

Defiance Blake understood. He knew his way around. Without defiance, you were back there in your kid's bedroom for the rest of your life, pleading out with small change every now and then to scuttle to a nearby movie before returning to fly under the radar again. Parental warnings, women's threats, the remorseless tears of virgins had given him significant life experience.

"Here is why I am ready to assume the vacant position, here is why I am willing to be the Messianic figure to the generations," Blake began and went on from there, a little expressiveness here, some quotations of Isaiah or Jeremiah there, a doctrinal panache that he had accumulated

with some difficulty accompanying his presentation. Blares of appeal, one-syllable warnings of apocalypse in his absence, a bessel of Zeplaniah. "You will excuse me, gentlemen," he said in conclusion. "I'm a trifle unsettled here. Just a little unsettled in the presence of what I know to be a major challenge, a real opportunity. I'm overwhelmed by the ambition to serve, I am doing the best I can."

This was certainly true. Blake had always done the best he could. This was Blake's most profound delusion, that he had fully applied himself, that no failure was from lack of definition. None of the hastily assembled court seemed interested in debating the issue with him; they sat in solemn accord, nodding their heads and looking at one another, this group of bearded men of indeterminate age and ambition, in ways more profound, more searching than the neglectful and largely dispossessed Blake had suspected in a colorful lifetime. At length, one of them, after what appeared to be a flurry of consultation, spoke to him.

"My name is Herschel," the man said irreverently. "I am thirty-eight years old, and I have been selected as the spokesman for this group. I serve reluctantly, I might note. This is not a task I would have willed. How did you get into these quarters? How long have you been at this?"

"At what?"

"Conversant with the needs of this sect. Interested in filling what you take to be a vacancy. Filled with ego but with no sense of identity. Angry, but at a point of great submissiveness."

"Ah," Blake said. "I don't know."

"Poised at this phalanx of persuasiveness and doom. Have you always been this way? Or is it a recent development?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Blake said earnestly. "I am concerned only with making a case for myself."

"Case for yourself," the man said. Blake's statement seemed to speak to him in some profound manner. Herschel's beard, a beard remarkably similar to all the other beards behind the raised table before which Blake stood penitent, trembled with knowledge or perhaps simple aggrandizement. "Why would you want to make a case for yourself? What of the Messianic codes, the conflicting views of Maimonides and the Kabbalists? Can you resolve them? And surely you do not think that you supersede them."

"I come not to supersede but to fulfill—"

"Are you Jewish?"

"Of course I'm Jewish," Blake said. "Do you think I'm stupid? Do you think I'd come and ask for a job as your Messiah if I weren't Jewish? That would be ridiculous."

"But you already are ridiculous," Herschel said. "Of course, that is part of your fundamental appeal. I would not deny that in any way. Pardon me for a moment while we consider this." He withdrew, motioned the others to gather. They fled away, sank into deep consultation. Hands fluttered, voices carried. Shouts, words of Yiddish barb. The two factions, he guessed, were battling, vision pitted against vision, and through it all, the solemn and hopeful Blake waited with what he called in his own inter-

nal monologue "an awful patience." Megillah, someone said. World To Come, said another. Prophetic fulfillment, said a third. Embarrassment, said a fourth. Practical guidance, said someone else.

A vote was taken.

"Very well," Herschel said briskly, returning, his features contorted by satisfaction. "Listen here. The Rabbi of blessed memory warned us that there would be conflicts, uncertainties. That rivalry would make it impossible to appoint a successor from within our ranks. That there would come from the West, or perhaps it was the East, an apostate who would seek the crown, and that this crown would be given because only he could unite us. The Rabbi was quite definite on this point. Some of us ascribed his insistence upon an apostate, in fact the vision itself, to senility, but here you are."

"Here I am," Blake said agreeably. "And here I will always be."

"Indeed," Herschel said. "The Rabbi of blessed memory was a *tzaddik*, a saint, a holy man, a worker of miracles, the Messiah himself, but some of us would believe that his visions were no more than

senile imaginings, yet even they see the practicality of accepting you as the fulfillment of the great Rabbi's prophecy. What do you think, Blake?

"Do you truly want to be appointed?"

"What else do I have to do? What else would bring me here?"

"So," Herschel said. "So, then, in accordance with the declaration of the Rabbi, you are so appointed. Why not? Why shouldn't you be? It so happens that we have only recently come to the decision that we must fill this appalling vacuum or lose all control of our destiny, not that it doesn't seem pretty well gone already. So this is clearly *hashgacha*, Divine Providence, the Holy One Blessed be He having a hand in our affairs. And no one else has stepped forward to fill the position."

"I accept," Blake said. The capitulation was so immediate that it shocked him, but he managed to conceal that shock from the assembled, or hoped that he had. He had never expected the procedure to go so quickly; he had imagined objections, responses, dim concordance in the corridors, the necessity to engage in disputation, examination of his genitalia, perhaps, for signs of the impostor. But here he was, so quickly given what had for so long been unclaimed, his every weakness a strength in the wake of the Rabbi's prophecy. Had the deceased Rabbi himself ever believed in anything he had ever said, or was it all politics, a way of withholding a planned succession that might have sped the Rabbi too soon on his way? Blake suspected that he would never know. "I'm grateful," he said, already considering his next move and finding with some surprise that whatever procedures he might have envisioned had so quickly departed. "Of course, it is going to take a while for me to figure out the best method for..." For what? For return.

"No problem," said Herschel.

"No problem," said the elders, all of whom seemed to have gathered voice. "*Is gornitz*," Herschel said for all of them. "Just as long as you feel that you're doing right." And he leaned forward

"Here
I am,"
Blake said
agreeably.

to gather him in. Blake felt himself being gathered, felt something wondrous, felt something arched and poised within his heart that he had never before known to exist. The awful grasp, that enormous comity of the believers.

The gravitas and solemnity of responsibility, the mantle of leadership, gathering him in, swaddling him in its weight.

Well, then, was this what the Rabbi had felt, was this what had killed him? Of course, the old man had been in his nineties, but this kind of thing could kill a horse. A canyon of horses. All vacancy afforded, all locations dwelt, enfolded in such a gigantic clutch, the ingathered Blake felt himself to have become resplendent.

And in that condition, availing himself of the great privilege of his new position, he looked upon his brothers, those priests, inclined his head toward the beating of wings, the shine of timber, the clutched and clutching reach of the lost Rabbi himself. So close that their hands seemed to touch. Forget latter destiny, the Messiah dwelt behind: That had always been the secret, first the Messiah, then the quest for union. All of it simple, then.

Blake thought: I should have grasped this a long time ago. I have become the Rabbi, the Rabbi now me, the two of us so close. The two of us waiting and breathing in the unfurled cloak of the World To Come. Hanging from the great Heaven itself.

Is this what the Rabbi felt as he waited for the ancient and repossessed times to begin? Could the Rabbi have known such longing, such posture? He thought of his parents and their endless, bleating call to sheephood; he thought of the women he had loved and lost and knew that their vision for him had been thwarted for this, his destiny. This was it, then, all part of another and greater plan, a magnificent construct to bring him, the suffering and astonished Blake, wholly beyond himself, slammed to his knees in this cavern on Eastern Parkway, waiting for the host of all hosts to thus bind him tightly, toss him to the throbbing and merciless stones below?

Was he Abraham's discovered lamb?

He gathered his people around him, their eyes fixed on him in trust and entreaty, dignity and purpose infusing his words. "It is time for *minyan*. Let us pray."

"Barucha es Adonai bamevorach. Come and bless the Lord."

And the response: *"Baruch Adonai bamevorach l'alai va'ad. Blessed is the Lord forever and ever."*

—and thought, amid the chanting of Hebrew barely remembered, my oh my: If he had become a believer—in fact, the true believer—was this the only prophecy he would fulfill?

BLAKE SAT contemplating the growing pile of *kvitlach* on the desk before him. The stream had been endless, a veritable Noah's flood of the anguished, the wretched, the riven, and the pained.

They sent their *kvitlach*, their tear-stained letters, typed, handwritten, scribbled on scraps of loose-leaf or paper towel or yellow-legal or stationery, the litany of their woes.

They came in person—they came on foot, by bus, by subway, by airplane. The lame and the halt in their multitudes, five years' worth of

leaderless, Messiahless followers. With questions, their questions.

A blessing for my daughter, she just became a *kallah*, a bride. The young man, he wants to sit and learn in *yeshiva* and how will they make ends meet when the babies arrive—

My wife, she is staining and we have not touched for three years—

My father, he is terribly ill, can you say a prayer—

My grandson, oy, he has become an *apikores*, an apostate, he won't even keep kosher any more—

My mother, my father, my sister, my brother, my soul, my sins, my *mitzvos*—

And the demands of the group. Decisions. Should the outreach house in Boise open a new branch, or should the money be directed to the new synagogue in Geneva? Should they continue focusing on Sabbath candles for girls, or should they put a new spin on the campaign—maybe the kneading of *challah* dough or the wearing of longer skirts and sleeves? Leadership. Focus. Vision.

Miracles.

Blake's head was splitting, like the Red Sea, his eyes aflame like Moses' burning bush. The pleas, the hunger calling from the eyes of the disparate

visitors, the women with wigs and stockings and squalling infants, the men with yarmulkes and sidelocks and Talmudic tomes, the entreaty through their words, through their prayers: Direction. Redemption.

It was time for a miracle. After all, what were Messiahs for anyway? Just to permit the staining women to touch their sex-starved husbands, to reassure the mother of the intermarried young man that her son had sanctified himself through love and anointed himself with the juices of his Catholic beloved as surely as Mama had anointed herself with the hallowed droplets of the *mikvah*? To move outreach houses and synagogues around the globe like Monopoly pieces? To raise a hand in benediction, with Hebrew words barely remembered from pre-Bar Mitzvah Hebrew school, the slanting sunlight calling to him with the joyous shouts of his public school friends, free to bat the ball after school while he sat struggling with alien letters and ancient sounds?

Already the unrest had begun. New factions had sprung up, as brutal in their fire as the old. He is leading us away from the fold. He is overturning the holy Torah, he is sowing seeds of dissent and destruction. Who had, after all, really *heard* the original Rabbi speak of an apostate as his successor? A teacher who, in those last years, had spoken in riddles more convoluted and florid than the Talmud itself, than the legends of Rabbi Nehuniah ben Hakaneh? What kind of *beitge Yid*, holy Jew, would permit music on Sabbath and have tables overflowing with milk and honey—and meat? There was talk of overthrow, of replacement, a pale young *yeshiva* student clamoring to take Blake's place.

But then there were the faithful, the devoted, the grateful, the wives freed of menstrual taint, the young men freed of masturbatory restriction, shyly investigating their circumcised trees of life without the burden of ancient guilt. A tiny but growing nexus of the redeemed.

Was this not enough? thought Blake. One by one, was this not the path of God Himself?

But, gazing at the pile of white and gray and yellow paper, like late winter slush, he knew the answer. He knew.

Being a Messiah meant more, had to mean more, or it was a job as

Was he
Abraham's
discovered
lamb?

tedious, as dreary, as spiritless, as the nine-to-five that his parents and circumstance had imposed, as the women had imposed, that dreary, blatted succession of breasts and limbs and complaint. Plenty of trouble in the here and now, but at least it had raised him to a kind of glorious sufficiency, and Blake felt a kind of assurance that had never before been his.

Because being a Messiah meant grandeur, right? Wasn't that the best part of it? Addressing the masses. Miracles. Transcendence. That light, that aura, that ingathering of those early moments of his appointment.

Redemption.

It was time to call for a *fabregben*, a gathering. An assembly of all the faithful to bear witness to the rebirth of the movement.

THE WORD had gone out among the faithful. The leader, the new Messiah, was convening the multitudes. There were snickers, guffaws on the part of the anti-Blakes, there were fervent little protests on the part of the Blake devotees, there was a general air of unrest, of curiosity, of excitement and anticipation. They knew, the holy assembly, that they were on the verge of a great and final revelation, a mimic that would vault them beyond the confines and dictates of history to the Land of Promise—not the ersatz and secular Israel, but the true and needful *grulah*, deliverance. Redemption.

The men, black-suited and white-shirted, their hair a tapestry of sidelocks and silken skullcaps; the women behind the tall partition quieting their bawling infants and dangling toys before their uncomprehending, restless toddlers; the masses thronging the assembly hall, waiting for the words, the deeds, that would transform and transfigure history, destiny, existence itself.

And before them, Blake: five feet six, solemn countenance, yarmulke in adornment, his posture of the utmost gravity, his hands outstretched like the very eagle wings of divine promise.

He considered the situation. The pressing crowds, the multitudes assembled outside, men on one side of the street and women on the other, a few curious reporters from *The New York Times* and *The Daily News*, a scattering of Modern Orthodox with knitted yarmulkes and Reform Jews with no yarmulkes at all, and a Catholic priest for good measure. All eyes, all hearts, all souls fixed upon him. Blake. Blake the Messiah.

"*Shalom Aleichem*." That much Hebrew he remembered. More, though: He needed more. "*Barnach ata, amen*." There. That was Hebrew, was it not? Now time for some Yiddish. "*Eppis, shaine bocher, yiddene*." So far, so good.

Or was it? A new restlessness, a murmur as people looked to each other. Blake found himself sweating. They were waiting for inspiration, for guidance, for the promised miracle and all reposed within him, Blake, this ordinary, shiftless, disaffected Jew with no particular credentials. A disappointment to his parents. (Papa had died years ago, but was Mama even here today to *shep naches*, and to *kvell* over the glory of her son's position? Or the troops of women who had toppled his frail entreaties, turned away his fragile attempts, women who knew that he "would never amount to anything.") Well, what would they say now?

Oh, ye, yes: the women. Where were they now? They could be here, perhaps they were, he could sense them leaning, peering at him from their position behind the partition. Well, he would give them a better look at what was going on.

"Take it down!" He pointed. "The *nachitzak*." A spectacular

word he must have learned someplace after all: the ritual barrier between the sexes.

Pandemonium. What was he saying? Heresy! Promiscuity! *Pritzen!* Removal of the barrier and what next? *Heftelins!* Entropy, chaos?

"Take it down, take it down, smash the false gods as Abraham did with his father's idols, as Moses did with the tablets, as Joshua did with the walls of Jericho."

Now there, at last, was language they understood. A murmur swept the crowd as the walls were disassembled and moved away, the women blinking into the sudden glare of unwonted exposure.

And oh, at this unlikely and sanctified moment, Blake felt it. That organ, that damned vehicle of covenant and inconstancy, suddenly surging to life at the sight of all those women with their hats and their wigs and their stockings and sleeves and infants.

It shook, it rocked with sudden melody, it rose and called and sang, and then Blake knew what he must do. The call of the Shofar, the cry of the Rabbi across the barrier, the heat of the male bodies and female bodies and infant bodies crowding and crowding and steaming and praying.

Oh, boy, he knew then.

Blake chose to dance. Easy does it. A slow, chanting, swaying at first, then faster, wilder, Elijah's whirlwind, the thunder of Sinai, the fire of the Chariot. The shouting and the stamping of the crowd, the goats unchained, as they, too, began to move. Homage to the Rabbi at last and his prophecy fulfilled, all the dreadful witness of that mystical, final dance: I believe with perfect faith in the coming of the Messiah.

The mountains danced like goats, the valleys leaped like lambs in spring, the earth labored and traveled and from the dervish of coiling bodies, that flaming, shuddering serpent of light. ☞

about the Author

Barry N. Malzberg's first science fiction story appeared in the August 1967 issue of *Galaxy*. Since then he has published several hundred more, nine collections, and more than thirty novels in the genre. Malzberg's *Beyond Apollo* was the first winner of the John W. Campbell Memorial Award in 1973; his collection of essays on science fiction, *Engines of the Night*, won the *Locus Award* in 1983.

Malzberg was editor of *AMAZING Stories and Fantastic* in 1968, and edited between Harry Harrison and Ted White.



about the illustrator

Greg Spalenko is an international and award-winning illustrator of books, magazines, and newspapers. His work has appeared in publications such as *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Rolling Stone*, *Spin*, *Sports Illustrated*, *Playboy*, *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, and others. Greg also delights in making music. Look for his first CD—*The Visions of Vesperina*, a collaborative work with Michelle Barnes under the group *Vesperina*—in music stores near you.



*She craved a once-in-a-lifetime experience.
He was afraid that's exactly what it
would turn out to be.*

THE ROAR SHACK

3-D VIOLENCE TOOK THE STAGE with an explosive crash of punk rock machine-gun guitar, a malevolent wall of sound that threatened to destroy everyone and everything around.

Once they held the audience's attention by sheer force, the band slowly lessened its assault. Moody, ethereal synthesizer swirled up in an undulating crescendo to fill the vacuum, and I turned away, back to the whiskey sweating on my private table.

The Jameson burned smoky warmth through my stomach, making my mouth water in sympathy. Two synths, an autodrum rack—they were just like every other band that played at The Roar Shack. Or anywhere else, for that matter. The stringed guitar was a novelty these days, but only a novelty. Nothing that could change the underlying *vibration* of their music. Certainly not enough to separate 3-D Violence from the flat, barren drone of my life.

Then she stepped into the light, and began to sing.

The singer didn't look like a typical genepunk—no external modifications that I could see—but she had obviously done some major retooling. When I had listened to the demo disc the guitar player had brought me for their booking, I'd figured the layered vocal arrangements for multitracked studio work. But even here, live, each of her three voices sang independently, as

though she had built two extra voice boxes into her throat. Her contralto sang a quiet ostinato, swimming calmly through the synthesized waves. An alto countermelody flirted with the boundaries of polyphony. Still, though her engineering was unique, I would have ignored it all as mere curiosity—like the pale vibration of the guitar—except for the soprano. Except for that voice singing a wordless melody of sound patterns, a voice that filled the club and shocked all others to silence.

A voice that stabbed deep into my soul, ripping open old, unhealed wounds.

Lynn...

Was the rest of the audience caught in her spell, too? Stunned by the clear, pure power of that voice, frozen in place so that even the lines of convergence marking the patterns of their

ILLUSTRATION BY
ADAM REX



movement and interaction ceased their dance and became static?

Or was it simply that she so entranced me, so overwhelmed me with those nourishing waves of force that no other vibrations could struggle into my awareness? I couldn't say. My only real memory of that entire set is of her, of that voice filling voids in me that had been empty for so long.

She sang in a voice that wasn't hers. *A stolen voice...*

I stared helplessly at her for the whole set, unable to turn my eyes away, unable to free myself from her pulse. She sang with perfect clarity, her voices ringing pure, even tones despite runs from bare whisper to crashing power. When she did let that one voice fall from purity, it belled with a perfect vibrato, quivering at exactly seven hertz. Seven pulses every second: the frequency of the standing wave induced in a human skeleton by the blood rushing from heart to norta. The frequency of theta waves—those brain waves most closely associated with meditation, or the dream state.

For almost an hour I stared at her, entranced, enthralled. And when the last song ended, when she let the last note fade

For almost an hour I stared at her, entranced, enthralled. And when the last song ended, and the world came to life once more, she stared at me.

away and the world came to life once more, she stared at me. Through the glare of stage lights and the haze of cigarette smoke she could not have seen me—could not even have seen my table, sequestered in the back corner where I could keep an eye on everything that happened in my club—and yet she stared directly at me. She couldn't have seen me, but she knew I was there.

Somehow, she *sensed* me.

The ice in my glass had melted. I could see water and whiskey swirling into each other, fluid dynamics making patterns of chaos. Pain blossomed behind my eyes, and I jumped out of my chair and lurched toward my office. As I passed the bar I grabbed a bottle of Jameson and told Magda, "No one comes back here."

THREE HOURS LATER the bottle stood half empty on my desk. The Roar Shack was quiet now, and empty, but waves of rhythm still vibrated around me. At least they didn't hurt anymore—the whiskey had seen to that. I capped the bottle and left it on my desk, then locked my office behind me.

"You okay, Boss?" Magda's voice asked from the darkness.

"Dandy," I said flatly.

"Sure?"

The place was all swept, chairs up on tables, the bar wiped down, the coolers restocked. The bar was closed, and everyone had gone home—everyone but Magda. She's a good kid. Been working for me five years, longer than anybody else. I remem-

ber the day she came in, how lost she looked. She'd had a kid, a two-year-old little boy, she said, but he had died. Her marriage fell apart after that, and now she had no family, no home, and no job.

I hired her as a waitress; within three months she'd worked herself behind the bar. I've never regretted it. Like I say, Magda's a good kid.

"Sure," I said. "Thanks."

She finished her Guinness and walked out. "See you tomorrow," she called out as the door shut behind her.

After five years, it seems like I know just about everything about Magda. I've never told her anything about my past, though. And thankfully, she's never asked.

THE LIT END of a cigarette hung like a firefly in the darkness. I saw it as soon as I walked outside, smelled the cloying-sweet clove scent of its burning, but I ignored it. I was used to people waiting for me after hours—bands wanting a gig, or someone looking for a job. I was in no mood for a hassle that night, so I locked the door and walked off down East Carson, away from the smoke and its bearer.

"Qyinn."

The voice stopped me dead. I had to give her credit—she didn't even bother to use all three voices. Just the one that mattered. I closed my eyes against the pain inside and waited.

She walked up beside me. In her footsteps, even in her breathing, I felt the rhythm. It couldn't be accidental—it was a part of her, and she was aware of it.

She said nothing, just stood there silently. Breathing, pulsing. Finally I couldn't stand it any longer. I took a deep breath and forced my courage out.

"Great set," I said, my eyes still closed. "If you're looking for another show, you can have it any time you want. Come in before five and I'll check the schedule—"

"I know who you are."

My eyes opened. "What do you mean?"

"I know what you did. I know about Lynn."

I reached unsteadily for the brick wall and slumped against it. I stared at the girl, trying to figure out who she was. *How could she know?*

She was short, maybe five-two, and a little heavy. I couldn't understand how a voice that powerful could come out of such a small body, even with genepunking. No, actually, I understood all too well—knowledge that drew at my deepest cravings and scared the hell out of me.

"What do you want?" I asked.

She took a drag off the clove and dropped her gaze to the sidewalk. "I was nine the first time I heard her. It was an outdoor show. My sister took me. When I heard her, I just... I went to every performance after that—snuck into a club early and hid there all day, did whatever it took just to hear her. The last show—her last show—I was there. I saw what happened. I *felt* what happened. And I know you did it."

When she looked up at me again, her eyes were glistening. "I

want you to do the same thing to me."

Terror shook through me. I took a step away from her, along the wall, then another, and then I was running hard, desperately. Above the sounds of my footsteps, I heard crying.

HOW CAN I describe Lynn? She was my lover, my world, for almost four years, but without the voice, how can anyone possibly understand what she was to me?

She was an artist, one of the only people in Pittsburgh doing the new electric tats right after the whole genepunk craze hit big. I went to her for my first job, twenty-two years ago—a simple bit above my right biceps, a yin-yang, plain black and white that flashes into a curled fetus and skeleton when I flex. The pictures are simple enough, but I wanted the transitions smooth, and I'd heard Lynn was the best in town at implanting the myoelectric crystals that make for motion, so I went to her.

We'd never met, but as soon as I walked into her house and saw her, I felt it. Something clicked inside me. There was something about her that drew me in. I didn't understand what it was until she started working.

Unlike most tattoo people, who blare old-fashioned rock music way too loud the whole time they work, Lynn played nothing. Instead, she sang, and as soon as she opened her mouth, it hit me. Something in her singing unnerved me—not necessarily any quality peculiar to her voice, but a resonance that I felt below it, something integral not to her song but to her. She was only singing idly to her herself while she worked, not even thinking about it, but that was enough. Whatever power she harbored within, I felt my whole future in it.

I returned for two more tats over the next three months before Lynn finally agreed we were meant for one another—meant to be together forever.

Get two metronomes. Set them so they're counting out rhythms just a fraction out of step and put them side by side on a table—they'll soon be rocking away in perfect synchronization. It's a phenomenon called entrainment. In the case of the metronomes, it occurs because of the reinforcement of mechanical vibrations through the table, but entrainment isn't limited to mechanical systems. Any oscillator is subject to entrainment. And everything in the universe vibrates—including us.

Women who live or work together often find their menstrual cycles synchronized after a few months. That's entrainment. Ever feel completely at ease with someone you've only just met? Why do you think it's called being "in tune" with them, getting a "good vibration"?

Two thousand years before physicists discovered that everything in the universe is at its heart a collection of vibrating particles, Pythagoras understood the secret. "A stone is frozen music," he said, and what is music but vibration?

I lived surrounded by Lynn's rhythms, enveloped by them. Not just the music of her voice, but the unique vibration, complex and subtle, of her existence. That was the true music she expressed with her voice.

She sang constantly—not actual songs, not words, but idle melodies, an inner music. She had a need to sing, as though she would die if she weren't producing music. And I soon discovered a need to feel her music.

Her vibration fed me, nourished me, and I soon became dependent on it. Addicted to it. And when Lynn's rhythm ended, it sent me into withdrawal, a withdrawal that for eighteen years other music could assuage but could never completely cure. Until that night. But even that was only a temporary cure, and it brought with it a pain all its own.

Exhaustion and whiskey finally ganged up on me an hour or two past sunrise. When I awoke that evening, I went straight to The Roar Shack.

"Rhapsody came by to see about gigs," Magda said when I walked in. She put down the glass she was polishing and tried not to look at me. "You know, the girl from 3-D Violence. The singer." I could tell she was worried, even though she was doing her best to cover it.

I poured a glass of Jameson, adding a spritz of ginger ale as an afterthought—it was breakfast, after all.

"Oh. Book them any night they want."

"Well, I told her we're pretty much solid through—"

I shook my head. "Any night she wants. Extend the lineup, bump somebody if you have to."

Magda was silent for several beats. After a while, she asked, "Is that really a good idea, Boss?"

"Probably not," I admitted. "But do it anyway."

I could sense Magda working up the nerve to ask me a question, so I took my drink into my office and locked the door.

Hearing Rhapsody sing overwhelmed me with a flood of guilt and memories I had tried to ignore for almost two decades. Why, then, was I so eager to hear her again? Why does a junkie shoot up even though he knows it's killing him? Addiction is a dangerous power—the need is so great that the fix is always worth whatever suffering it causes later on.

That's why I owned The Roar Shack: so I could feel music every night of the week. Even if it wasn't the *right* music, it was something, at least, and it was live. And it has to be live.

Recorded music doesn't work for me, doesn't give me the high. Because it's not the music itself that I sense, but the vibration behind it. The rhythm of the performance. The pulse and soul of the *creation* of the music. That is what I feel.

I've had the sense as long as I can remember, though I never really understood it until I met Lynn. Force waves of any kind impinge on my consciousness. When I feel the warmth of the sun on my back, I also feel how that energy vibrates. When I hear a bird sing, I also notice the way its rhythms radiate from it, interact with the world it inhabits, converge on my awareness.

Is it a new sense, or just a change in perception? All the regular senses respond to rhythmic patterns of vibration—the nose acts like a spectroscope, the vision center in the brain responds not to wavelengths but to frequency patterns. And other senses besides our basic five do exist in nature. Birds and bees and even butterflies can sense the Earth's magnetic field; some fish can detect electric currents. Again, both of these senses are based on vibration.

So I lived with this sense all my life, never able to understand it. And I learned early on to keep quiet about it.

In the land of the blind, they say, the one-eyed man is king. Utter crap. He's a freak, a misman. How does he explain, when everyone starts to wonder about him, that he just had this "sense" that Bob was about to show up, or just "knew" that the

lost keys were over there? How do you explain it to people if there's no language to describe even the concept? How do you explain it to *yourself*? You can't. You just can't do it, and so the world figures there's something wrong with you. Pretty soon, you start to think the same thing.

And maybe there is. I don't know.

Maybe there are others out there like Rhapsody and me. Maybe this is some genepunk disease, a mutation caused by playing with our DNA too much just for the sake of giving ourselves real vampire teeth, or devil's horns on our foreheads, or even an extra pair of arms like I've seen some kids try with varying success. Maybe it's the next step in human evolution, and someday in the future everyone will be able to sense the lines of force that emanate from everything and form the universe. Or maybe I'm just a freak.

I always thought so, until Lynn came into my life. Her vibration was so pure, so rich, that for the first time in my life I reviled in my ability. So much so that, like I said, it became an addiction. Lynn had never sung for real—her talent was entirely natural, untrained—but we played with it, experimented, and as her abilities grew, so did mine. Eventually, right about the time I convinced Lynn to start singing in public, I discovered a new way to use my sense, a new power.

A power I killed her with.

SEVEN WEEKS LATER, 3-D Violence returned to The Roar Shack. I spent the evening in my office, alone but for Mr. Jameson's company, dreading what was to come but unable to stay away.

Life Size Head and Stark Raving Nude opened. The house was packed with an enthusiastic crowd, but neither of those bands put much energy into their sets. 3-D Violence had been getting great reviews all over town, but the Heads and the Starkers had both been around for a while, and I'm sure they resented opening for such a new band.

When Stark Raving Nude finished, I abandoned the office for my private table. The club was still full, which was a good thing—if Rhapsody really did understand, and for whatever reason wanted to follow in Lynn's footsteps anyway, I would need every possible distraction.

The crowd-murmur dropped as the band members climbed onstage to check their instruments. I knew this was my final warning—if I wanted to leave, I had to do it now, before the singing. I also knew I would stay right where I was. I had kept away from their other shows, but no matter how much it hurt me—no matter how much it hurt her—I wouldn't miss this one.

The lights went out. The room fell silent, and I stiffened in anticipation. Two red spots, low and cool, came up quarter bright, angled off to the sides of the stage. Cigarette smoke swirled in the beams, and the light glinted like neon off the chrome instrument stands. Layers of sound began to flow in waves from the synthesizers; in that pale, washed-out light the musicians were almost invisible against the air.

Then from the back of the stage, from the floor, a blue spot flared on, and Rhapsody was there in front of it. The light spilled around from behind her, outlining her with a sinuous blue aura, shining streams of light through her hair. Her huge shadow rose up above her, a ghost hovering in the bright, smoky air.

Even before she started to sing, the chords of her song struck me. She played her voices as instruments, singing pure, unarticulated notes. No words—nor did she need them. Music is more precise than words, Mendelssohn said.

She stared directly at me the whole time she sang, and I stared right back. I couldn't steal my eyes from her pleading gaze, not my attention from her music.

Her music. It sounded so different from Lynn's, but it *felt* just the same. And she was doing it on purpose, provoking me, daring me to reach out to her.

Constant exposure to Lynn, my complete immersion in her vibration, strengthened my sense over time. The lines of force became less tenuous, their convergence and interaction more powerful, until I felt almost as though I could grasp them in my hands and tug on them.

And in a way, I could.

Once I figured out what was going on, we made a game of it, Lynn and I—she would sing vibrations around me, and I would play with them, manipulate the oscillating pulses into something that complemented her vocal song. Sometimes I could only manage to tease an emotion or create a shimmering, pulsing chimera of light and color. But sometimes when we were completely attuned we would start some kind of feedback loop going, and at times like that there was no limit to the things that could happen. Sparks might literally fly between us as I tempted the vibrations of space and time into wrinkles as vivid and deep as anything you can imagine.

*The light spilled around from behind her,
outlining her with a sinuous blue
aura, shining streams of light through her hair.*

Can I describe how I do it? Describe how you raise your arm, or better yet, how you see or hear or touch something. Not the biophysical mechanisms involved, but the conscious act. I don't really *do* anything so much as I direct my attention toward certain rhythms around me and then it just happens. It's just part of who I am.

I still don't know exactly what happened that night eighteen years ago. Lynn was onstage at St. Michael's, this little goth club way out in Penn Hills, sort of half-sitting on a stool in front of the mike, her samplers racked up beside her. A single pale spot looked down on her from overhead. She sang samples into the boxes and looped those bits around at different intervals to create the background music she sang to. It was dreamy, meditative in a surreal way, and it could only have worked with a voice like Lynn's. That was the way she did her shows—no band, no instruments, just her voice. Just her.

Throughout the set I felt the energy between us growing. It was so strong I couldn't ignore it, but I didn't want to distract Lynn during a show, so instead of playing with it, I let the music lull me into automatic. That was my mistake.

The midbrain keeps sensory input in rhythm, and the midbrain operates below the conscious level. While I drifted, lost in Lynn's songs, my inner sense was busy reinforcing those vibrations and feeding them back to her. Resonance.

As our silent pulse grew stronger and stronger, Lynn became somehow indistinct. Onstage, she began to tremble, her whole body vibrating.

And then in an instant flash that ran up the spectrum, she was gone.

A wave of shock spiked through the audience as Lynn collapsed on the floor. I reached out in panic, trying desperately to feel her vibration, to grab onto her and pull her back, but it was gone. She was gone.

For eighteen years I had suffered for what I did to Lynn, hating myself for it—and now this girl *wanted* me to do it to her. *Why?*

The song faded. Rhapsody, still staring pointedly at me, leaned into the mike and announced, "This next song is called 'Being Music.'"

I doubt anyone else caught the double entendre. Her bandmates probably didn't even get it. But it suddenly made everything clear to me.

We are not our bodies, but what we are is contained in our bodies. Francis Crick—the DNA guy, the man who made the whole genepunk revolution possible—even suggested that consciousness itself arises from oscillations in the cerebral cortex. When my midbrain found her resonant frequency, the rhythm became too powerful. It overwhelmed her structure, until the reinforced vibration disintegrated her cortex. And when I destroyed Lynn's body, I disband *her*.

As her vibration lost cohesion and fled, I felt it go. Rhapsody must have felt it, too—but from a different perspective.

I was always an audience, without any talent to create on my own, but Rhapsody was a musician. Perhaps that night was the first time she ever really noticed her sense—perhaps Lynn's departing pulse awakened it. What must she have thought? A flood of life rushed through her, a perfect rhythm—it must have felt like pure music.

That's why she had genepunked her vocal cords, why she had worked so hard to emulate Lynn's rhythm, why she sang to me now. She wasn't merely trying to follow in an idol's footsteps. She wanted to reach that infinite vibration. She wanted to *become* music.

I'd never thought of Lynn's death in that way before; it almost made me happy.

But not happy enough to do the same thing to Rhapsody.

Perhaps I had set Lynn's spirit free, released her soul to dissolve into that pure music. I wanted to think so. I *needed* to think so. And maybe it was that experience that Rhapsody wanted to share. But whatever the metaphysical effects, I had still, in the sense that mattered the most to me, killed Lynn and her music. I had destroyed that perfect loveliness once before; I couldn't do it again, no matter how much this girl thought she wanted it.

As Rhapsody sang, folding her voices about one another, weaving them into a tapestry of longing and sorrow, I struggled to unravel it. I focused on her song, noticing every pulse, every rhythm, fighting my reaction, letting her lead me only so far. We pushed each other to our absolute limits, but for her sake, for my sake, I couldn't let her push me beyond.

And then it was all over. The set was done, the music faded away, and the roar of the audience brought me back. The band took their bows and started to break down their gear.

Rhapsody just stood there, her hands clenched around the mike stand, her cheeks wet with tears. She stood motionless, her glare stabbing at me with a mixture of disappointment, hatred, and despair. I stared back, knowing I could never explain to her why I could not help her. No, I should say *scusa* *mi*, because along with my understanding I finally had control.

Nor could I ever explain how grateful I was for that understanding, and for the freedom from my grief, if not from my guilt.

At last Rhapsody left the stage and The Roar Shack without a word to me, and I knew I would never see her again. But that was all right, because at least I knew she was out there somewhere—her, and her voices, and her music, all her own. I could never explain things to her, but I knew that if she kept searching she might one day understand it all for herself.

Exhausted, I put my head down on my table and closed my eyes. The sound and rhythms around me gradually faded as the crowd left. I let myself fade away as well, withdrawing into my thoughts, drifting free of everything.

"Boss?"

"I'm okay."

Mags laid her hand on my shoulder. "Are you really?" The concern in her voice felt as comforting as her touch.

I lifted my head and managed a smile. The Roar Shack was empty, the lights on. It was just the two of us.

"Grab a bottle," I told her as I pulled a chair around for her. "It's a long story." ☹



about the author

James C. Bassett is the author of the novel *Living Real*, as well as several short stories. He cowrote and acted in the *Charles Pinion*

film *Twisted Images* (billed as a psycho-punk glitter comedy), which *Film Threat* Guide named as one of "twenty underground films you must see."

Bassett currently serves as the editor of the *Forum of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America, Inc.* *Photos by Linda Applebee; cover by Dave Drabinski/Hypocrite Productions*

about the illustrator

In a constant state of motion, as evidenced by this photo, Adam Rex works and teaches in Tucson, Arizona, producing illustrations for a variety of clients including *White Wolf, Inc.*, *Wizards of the Coast*, and *Cricket Magazine*.





Instant Labor

BY DOUGLAS LAIN

ILLUSTRATION BY
JOHN JUDE PALENGAR



Scene 1, Take 1
A Confession at Quality Pie

*It's a nice job.
The pay's okay, the
hours fly by, and you
get a chance to really
expand your
horizons.*

"Turn off your electric eye, Webb," Ella says.

I zoom in, catch the full extent of her displeasure in my lens, and fade out. I switch the camera off, cap the lens, fold the device in on itself, and slip it into my shirt pocket.

She slaps a plate of fries and a cup of coffee down, and sits across from me in the booth with her arms stretched out on the tabletop and her frame pushed back.

"It's like something is dead inside you," she says.

We were at a dingy diner in northwest Portland, the Quality Pie. Ella worked there. It's my strongest memory of her—uniformed in pink, with her name tag pinned and propped up on her breast. She was always in motion. Ella could carry a pot of coffee and two trays of food without hesitation. She was an efficient worker, a good waitress.

I don't reply, but try to meet her gaze, to look her in the eye. I end up staring at her chest... reading and rereading her name tag.

"They sell this as if the only thing in life is convenience. I mean, suicide is convenient, too, right? It cuts down on expenses, saves time." She takes a sip of my coffee, grimaces, and reaches for the sugar.

"I want to have more time to work on my films. This way I can do that. I can dedicate all of my energy to my work and still make a living," I reply and take the sugar away from her before she starts to pour.

"But, Webb, do you want to erase, ignore, eight hours out of every day?" Ella asks.

"Isn't that what you do? Working here, isn't it like erasing your day?" I ask.

"No. It's not. It's not the same." She stands up from the booth, starts to go back to work, but I grab her hand, stopping her and spinning her toward me.

I'd gone to the Quality Pie that day to tell her. To confess what I'd done and receive forgiveness. But that wasn't going to happen.

It was the way we played it. I would rationalize, distort, and tangle, and she tried to push through to the truth. Usually we made love after, with her moving and working on me in the same way that she poured coffee or carried dinner trays, without hesitation.

I grab her hand, pull her to me so that we are nearly nose to nose. I reach up, pinch my eyelash, and delicately pull back the lid. Underneath is a tiny cord with prongs, a jack. A tiny red light at the tip of the cord blinks on and off against the pink

"Number six, aisle three?"

The supervisor nods, and his eyes glaze over as he scans the room. I follow his gaze and find myself looking at row after row of men and women in gray sweat suits, slumped over in metal chairs and held up by their restraints. The walls are covered with nappy green carpet. Thick white cords hang down from the ceiling and attach to thin wires that run into the workers' eyes.

The supervisor hands me my time card and tells me to punch in. I swipe it through the electronic scanner at the entrance gate to aisle three, and find cord number six. I go instant.

Plugging in and finding myself suspended in the web, surrounded by the video images and digital voices of the callers, was disturbing in itself, but what unnerved me most was being out of body.

It was primarily a process of deindividuation. I'd sync up with the mainframe, fall into an alpha state, and my body would dissolve. My sense of location, my spatial self, was the first thing to go. After that, my memories, my whole identity as it related to time, would vanish. And then...

I go instant. There is a flash of pink light, and a rush of faces and voices. Each caller demands attention, and I respond, breaking my focus into pieces and scattering out across the network.

A tiny red light at the tip of the cord blinks

skin of my eyelid.

"I've already done it. I'm instant," I say.

Ella just stares at me, at the tiny light in my eye, and then slowly backs away.

Scene 2, Take 1

Clocking In and Checking Out

The offices of Instant Labor, Inc. were a marvel of high-tech displays and computer equipment. Video monitors depicting incomprehensible diagrams and charts, along with multi-colored perspectives of the human brain, were set into the walls of the front lobby. Tall, clear plastic tubes filled with bubbling water towered behind the receptionist's desk. It was supposed to make an impression; convey authority. And it worked.

At least, it worked on me. I remember those offices clearly. I'd been in and out of them for months before going instant. The constant repetition of narration on the cerebral cortex, the reptile/hindbrain, the brain stem, and other neurological wonders excited me. I would be on the cutting edge, the forefront of the coming wave, and it all boiled down to synchronizing the patterns of my forebrain with my hindbrain... or something like that.

But after going instant I was taken down to the basement and shown the labor aspect of the operation.

"You are number six," my supervisor tells me.

"What?"

"Number six, aisle three. Go and plug in."

I am working as an answering service operator. Names and numbers and area codes run through my mind. I hear a symphony of dial tones, keystrokes, and a constant ringing.

I am forgetting, drifting out.

Scene 3, Take 5

Traveling, Editing, and the End of Politics

Ella wanted me to visit her parents. In a way, this represented the crux of our troubles. She wanted me to meet her parents. And I did, finally, near the end.

I am working on my film, the epic. It is the story of my life retold through the archives. I select images and scenes, fragments from old movies ranging from the Marx Brothers' *Go West* to Godard's *King Lear*, and insert footage from my life inside these video frames.

The plot is simple—it is the story of a filmmaker trying to discover the meaning of life, the state of the world, by combining present-day reality with the illusion of cinema history. It is the story of Webb Little's quest for a cinematic Holy Grail. In fact, that is the title: *The Quest(?)*.

I manipulate a puppet-self, a computer simulation of my own body that is programmed to adapt to whatever film environment it is plugged into, and try to weave these images into a coherent narrative.

The constant rhythm of the train moving down the tracks sets the beat as I edit my life on a portable multimedia processor.

"What are you doing?" Ella asks.

My puppet-self jumps down from the piano and walks to the front of the instrument. As I sit down I grow shorter for a moment, and then stretch out again. I shoot the keys, playing "Sugar in the Morning." Ella jumps down from the piano and walks over to one of the sofas, which is now much closer in.

My fingers continue to flip back and forth, pounding out the tune again and again.

"I can't think of the finish," I say.

"That's funny, I can't think of anything else," Ella replies. She bunches over and strides away from the sofa.

And I mean to stop, to follow her. But I can't stop shooting the keys, and images from the archives flow into my head. Buster Keaton falls out of a window, the Wizard of Oz appears, Billy Pilgrim blinks, and King Kong grabs Fay Wray, while I play the piano... while I keep shooting the keys.

I end up owing the film center over a hundred dollars for the session. I had edited for hours, but could only recall the beginning. And what I walked away with was the above dialogue, edited over and over into various backgrounds.

In one version Ella takes the place of Katharine Hepburn in the movie *Desk Set*. I am Spencer Tracy, and the two of us repeat our lines while we walk back and forth in front of a Technicolor wall of switches and dials. The mainframe computer is blinking furiously, and in the background the blonde

"Yeah?"

"I'm here now."

"What, do you need more footage?" she asks.

"Yeah," I say, and zoom in on her face, her smile.

She looks at the camera, flicks her nose with her middle finger, and then steps forward, covering the lens with her palm.

"What are you doing, Webb? Why are you doing this?"

I shrug, fold the camera in on itself, and stuff it into my back pocket. "What do I want? Is that what you want to know?" I ask. I reach out and grab her hand, pull it up to my mouth. "I want to make you a star," I say, and kiss her hand.

"What's this monster you're making going to be about anyway?" she asks.

"You want a drink?" I ask.

"Really, explain it to me again. What's the plot?"

"I'll tell you on the way. How about the Horse Brass?"

"Okay, yeah."

The back door of the Quality Pic opens with a rusty creak, and we step out into the dark rain. Ella opens her umbrella and holds it up over her head and against the outside light. The umbrella is striped red and white, and when Ella turns toward me her face is bright pink.

"Well, what's it all about?" Ella asks again.

I start talking.

story of my **life** retold through the archives.

workers that the machine has replaced swish their hips, and then sit and sulk. But this is off to the side, and we repeat our lines and the machine blinks furiously.

Another version puts us inside the film *King Dinosaur*. Ella accuses me of purposely alienating myself from her and from life while we hide in a cave. We are pursued by a giant iguana. The scene ends when I prove my love for her by taking the lizard's picture.

We do the scene on a desolate landscape from H. G. Wells's *Things to Come*, and again in the movie *Harvey*, where I take the place of the rabbit.

And Ella is Anne Bancroft in *The Graduate*, and I am Christopher Reeve in *Superman*.

And then, after all these versions are through, I find that I have edited together a scene that was completely unscripted. It consists only of my puppet-self standing in what looks like a control room from a NASA documentary. Rows and rows of computer consoles and red phones. The phones are ringing, and I am trying to answer them all.

Scene 7, Take 23

Going Instant Offline

I zoom in on Ella as she is covering her pink uniform with a dusty beige trench coat and releasing her hair from its tight bun. Ella bends forward, shakes out her hair, and stretches. It is a nice shot.

"I'm surprised to see you," she says as she reaches for her toes.

"I've been editing," I tell her. "It's been a very productive week."

Going instant is like going to sleep. When you link up with the network, your brain creates a series of vignettes, tiny dreams, based on what the system is feeding you. When I worked for Global Answering at Instant Labor, Inc., the voices of the callers would mingle together into small stories and scenes as my brain synced up with the system. I would often feel that I knew the calling party, that the callers were my parents, or old college professors, or I would think I was talking to Ella.

It was as though I was falling into a dreamless sleep, and in order to compensate I would flash through hundreds of dreams during the alpha phase, the phase between dreaming and waking.

"Webb? Are you okay? Hello?"

I am on the corner of Burnside and Park, and I am wet. The last thing I remember is seeing Ella's pink face, and then after that I was in the ocean and she was naked beneath me, and a telephone was ringing, and there was ice on everything, and there was a cat trapped in a house under some old books in an attic, and I saw my dead grandmother, and—

"Webb? Are you there? Is anybody home?" Ella asks.

"What?" I jerk forward, nearly lose my balance, and turn to look at her. "What happened?"

"I don't know. I thought you were telling me about your movie. Only what you were saying didn't make any sense," Ella says.

"What did I say?"

"It was something about insurance premiums, and the different companies that offer decapitation insurance."

I shrug and try to push the obvious conclusion from my

mind. I had blacked out, gone instant while I was offline, but I smile and shrug.

"Uh... that's what... that's what the movie is about. Alienation and, uh..."

"You were sleepwalking. You were out of it."

I stuff my hands into my coat pockets and step off the curb and into the street, "I haven't been getting much sleep lately," I say.

She stands on the curb and watches me as I step backward across the street. She stares out at me, runs her fingers through her long black hair, and frowns.

"Come on, the pub's going to close."

She steps into the street.

Scene 8, Take 1

Christmas I.V.

And then it was Christmas, and for some unknown reason the managers at Instant Labor, Inc. thought it would be a good idea to throw an office party. I took Ella, and we stood amid the input cords sipping cheap wine from Dixie cups and fondling the tinsel somebody had stapled to the walls. Half the staff sat slumped over in their chairs staring blankly ahead, their eyes forced open and wired, and the other half stared blankly at one another.

less than two days. A catheter and an I.V. was all it took to transform the workplace, to bring real efficiency, not only for the managers but also for the workers. We would all receive five-day weekends brought to us intravenously.

Scene 9, Take 11

A Confession at Quality Pie (reprise)

I am editing manually on a laptop computer at the Quality Pie. Ella brings me coffee and then returns to work. I watch her move back and forth between the booths, try to overhear the way she jokes with her customers, and I notice that she always looks the diners in the eye.

I turn back to my computer screen. I am trying to get past the scene with the rows of red phones that are always ringing, and back to some semblance of a narrative. My puppet-self is marching on Capitol Hill, walking alongside Martin Luther King, Jr., Louis Farrakhan, and dozens of Promise Keepers.

"The protest, the march, is not ideological. It can serve any cause," my puppet-self says.

Ella strides into the frame, carrying a sign that reads "Grassroots Politics." She pushes a few Promise Keepers out of view and begins to chant. "Freedom now, slavery never," she says.

"In fact," my puppet-self continues, "if the protest, the march, does have an ideology, it is a reactionary one. What we

I try to push the obvious conclusion from my mind.

"Well, it's Christmas Eve," I say to number eight. "You must be excited."

She is sitting on one of the tall metal stools that management has set up along the aisles, balancing precariously with her feet tucked between the rungs. When I speak to her she jerks, startled. I reach forward, spilling my wine onto the green carpet, and grab her shoulder, steadying her.

"There is nowhere to sit," number eight tells me. "There are all these stools but you can't sit on them." She slides to her feet.

"Are you all right?" Ella asks.

"My boyfriend died today," number eight says.

"What?" I ask.

"He's dead. I went to visit him last week, and he was fine. He was fine last week, and now he's dead," she says.

"How long was he in the hospital? Was he very sick?" I ask.

"He wasn't in a hospital. He was in prison. He was in prison, and now he's dead."

Ella and I don't say anything. We stand there looking at number eight, at the tall metal stool that nobody can sit on, and we don't say a word. The silence continues for a few moments, and then is broken by the arrival of the carolers.

Clean men and women in blue suits and red ties stroll into the input room singing "Deck the Halls" and pushing I.V.'s on rolling metal stands. Each I.V. has a bright red bow wrapped around it.

The I.V.'s were for the laborers. We were offered a great new opportunity. Our forty-hour weeks could be compressed into

should do is keep searching, and not merely repeat the mistakes of the past."

"Freedom now, slavery never," Ella chants again.

I pause, take my hands from the keyboard, and sip my coffee. There must be a way to merge this with the rest of the film.

The computer screen jumps and flickers, and Ella chants again.

"Freedom now, slavery never," she says. "You're hiding from your life, ducking your responsibility," she says. "It's like something is dead inside you."

"I just want more time to work on my film," my puppet-self responds. He is carrying a sign that reads "Brain for Rent."

The dialogue and images I inputted into the laptop using the direct interface editor are popping onto the screen randomly now.

"It's too late for me," my puppet-self says. "I've gone instant." I hit the reset button, erasing the scene. Ella brings me a refill of coffee, and I grab her wrist as she pours. Coffee spills onto the table.

"Can we get out of here?" I ask her.

"What?"

"I need to talk to you. Can we go?" I ask.

"Later, we'll talk later. I've got to finish my shift."

Ella leaves me there, goes back to the kitchen and brings out a piece of key lime pie for the booth nearest the front. She brings out some quality pie, and watches the patrons eat while I fumble with the laptop.

I rub my eye, finger the spot where the instant-jack makes a

bump on my eyelid, and start again.

"I'm instant," my puppet-self says as he marches up to King. I reach for the reset button.

Scene 10, Take 2

A Telephone Conversation

I plug in and begin to fade out. A woman's face appears in my head, ebony with puffy red rings around her eyes. The collar of her T-shirt is stained with what could be blood, and she is crying.

"I need to talk with someone," she says.

"What is your name?" I find myself asking.

"I feel like I might hurt myself. I..."

"Is this an emergency?"

"Can't you talk to me? Can't you just talk to me? I'm scared."

"What is your telephone number?" I ask. "Is this a dental emergency?"

Another face fades in. A white man in a blue dress shirt is holding his mouth and mumbling at me.

"What is your credit card number?" I ask, and then fade out. I break apart and go completely instant.

When my shift ended two days later, I asked the supervisor if there was any way I could access the records on the calls I'd taken. I wanted to know what had happened to the black

that my apartment was empty.

Ella had left me. She'd grown tired of living alone.

Scene 12, Take 1

Quality Pie, but Ella Won't Take Your Order

I spent the afternoon after Ella left editing my puppet-self into the movie *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*. The last scene, in which Kris Kristofferson woos the title character at Mel's Diner, played on my computer screen again and again.

"I don't care about that ranch. I love you, Alice," the abusive but lovable Kristofferson says. I roll the scene back.

"I don't care about the quest. I love you, Ella," my puppet-self says, and then leans forward and spits brown juice onto Mel's clean floors. "Shee-it," my puppet self says. "I'm done with the whole enterprise now. Done with enterprise totally."

"I love you too, Webb," Ella says. She rushes out from behind the counter, unties her apron and throws it back onto the heads of the customers on the stools. These cowboys in their John Deere caps and steel-toed boots laugh and then applaud as Ella falls into my arms.

We kiss, and the credits begin to roll.

But when I arrive at the Quality Pie, Ella isn't working behind the counter, but working the floor. I wave at her as she wobbles past with a tray of hamburgers and onion rings bal-

I'd blacked out, gone **instant** while I was off-line.

woman with the puffy eyes. He laughed at me, and then told me that I'd taken thirty thousand calls in the last forty hours alone.

I wasn't supposed to remember the calls I took. I wasn't supposed to be involved at all.

Scene 11, Take 1

Nobody's Home?

I lived with Ella. Did I forget that, too? No, I remember. We lived together in a double studio apartment in northwest Portland, and I would come home from a two-day stint at work and start editing, and then after another eight hours of that, if she was around, we'd go and get a drink . . . maybe fool around. I wish I could remember.

I march up to Martin Luther King, Jr., and confess.

"I'm instant," I tell him. All around are dark faces with broad smiles, involved smiles.

"I'm instant," I tell him.

"Me, too," he says. Martin Luther King, Jr., turns to me, leans toward me, and stops. The marchers slow down, then wait and watch as he pinches his eyelashes and pulls back. There, between his eye and the purple skin of his eyelid, is a tiny red light blinking on and off.

One day I ended a shift of editing to find that my apartment was empty. I'd taken to editing over the phone, direct access online. One day after racking up a bill that would keep me working around the clock for five days to make it up, I found

anced in one hand, and a pot of coffee swinging back and forth in the other. She does not wave back, of course.

I find an empty booth in her area and take a seat. She doesn't bring a menu, doesn't take my order.

As the hours pass, I fade. I wait for Ella's shift to end, and in the interim, while she works around me, ignores me, I begin to fade out. By the time Ella's shift does end, I'm almost gone completely.

"Ella," I say.

She is taking off her apron, letting her hair down as I step past the dishwasher's station and up to the door to the back room. She doesn't look at me, but reaches for her trench coat.

"Ella," I say, "I have to get your telephone number."

"I don't want to talk to you, Webb," she says. She stands, slings her knapsack over her shoulder, and then finally looks at me.

"Don't you see that this is an emergency?" I ask her. "I think I . . . I think I know how to spell your last name," I say. My vision blurs, Ella becomes a vague blur of gray and pink, and then Ronald Reagan appears.

He is lying in a single bed with a chimpanzee, and he is looking at me with scorn. "What are you trying to say, Webb?" Reagan asks me in a soft, feminine voice. "What do you want from me?"

"Your credit card number?" I ask him.

Bonzo shrieks, jumps up from the bed, and runs straight at me. The monkey's blue pajamas tear as he pushes me out of the way.

"Is the office still open?" Reagan asks.

Bonzo is jumping up and down and screaming. He is wearing

a space helmet with earphones attached to the sides. He is learning while he sleeps.

"No," I tell Reagan, "the office is closed now. . . . The office is closed."

Scene 13, Take 13 The Phone Room

I am inside a scene from NASA's documentary *The Eagle Has Landed*. Rows of red and white lights blink, and electric chimes beep, as the rows of red phones ring again and again.

My puppet-self is trying to answer the phones, trying to relay NASA's calls to the proper doctor or lawyer or cable installer. The phones ring, and my puppet-self runs back and forth answering. It goes on for what seems like years.

Scene 14, Take 1 Polaroids/Instant Photographs

I am disconnected in midstream. Rather than slowly emerging into regular consciousness, I am jerked out of the pool of calls and into the physical reality of my workstation.

"We need you to help us with some filing," my supervisor says.

I follow him upstairs, through the glamour of the reception area, and into a large storage closet. The closet is full of filing cabinets, and the drawers of the cabinets are open, papers

plastic garbage bag. I stuff papers and brochures down on top of the photos, and throw it all away.

Scene 15, Final Take The Quest(ion?)

I put in my two weeks' notice at work and used the time left plotting.

I downloaded my epic, all thirty-four hours of it, into my subconscious. Direct-access viewing every night. My dreams were of Ella and Groucho and stock footage of stampeding buffaloes and Ed Wood in a dress and Jimmy Stewart standing on a stepladder. Through it all my puppet-self danced and narrated and stood on its head.

I downloaded my quest into my brain at night, and during the day prepared for my film's first public screening. I rented a tuxedo, printed up programs, and waited for my last day to arrive.

I plug in and begin to fade out, but this time when a disheveled old man in a muscle shirt pops into my head to complain about blood in his stool, he is greeted by the thunder of beating drums.

"There must be a way out." My subconscious projects my puppet-self to the incoming calls. I am running through

I am unable to differentiate strangers from

spilling onto the ground. My job is to haul these records out to the dumpster. Instead I begin to shuffle through them, reading bits of the company's financial reports, skimming through a few promotional brochures, until I stumble upon the Polaroids.

They are old and faded; pictures of a Christmas party, and of a Halloween party, and of another Christmas party, and another.

Here is one where half of my head has been cut out of the shot. It looks like it must be a Thanksgiving party, or some other autumnal celebration. Brown and yellow construction paper leaves are taped to the wall of carpet behind my head, and I am leaning out of the shot. I am ducking away from a large woman who is swinging a headset through the air at me.

In another photo I find myself standing beside a young woman whose witch costume looks especially ridiculous because of the headset she is wearing. I am dressed as Elvis in this picture, which is strange. I don't like Elvis.

I rub my eyelid, feel the bump of the instant-jack, and then look down at the Polaroids again. The people in the photos are all wearing headsets. The answering service doesn't use headsets anymore.

I look at the photo of Elvis and the witch. The couple are smiling toward the camera, and holding hands. I don't recognize her. . . . I don't recognize him, either.

The Polaroids are old, I realize. Probably dating back to the late Eighties or early Nineties. The man in the photograph is not me at all.

I am unable to differentiate strangers from myself.

I bundle up the instant photos and dump them in the black

Raiders of the Lost Ark. I am pursued by savages; spears whiz by my head.

"Can you give a message to Ken?" the caller asks.

"Today's world is synthetic, spectacular. . . . you are asked to watch it unfold, but told not to act." I am steering a flying saucer. My puppet-self is sitting in a cockpit that looks like somebody's garage. A pie plate on a string swings into view. Plan 9 is in effect. The calls keep posering in; my audience is expanding.

"Is the office open?" the caller asks.

"This quest," my puppet-self says, "is to discover the truth hidden in the lie, to find the reality behind the illusion of modern living." My puppet-self holds aloft the sword Excalibur, and is made king. The caller sees a tiny figure riding against the lush green of the rain forest. My puppet-self is a knight in shining armor, my puppet-self rides into the dusk.

And then the epic is shattered and spread out into the system. My film is instant. It is ubiquitous.

My vision—and I did have a vision of what I wanted to create with this stunt—was that this video collage would stun the callers out of the spectacle. It was a ridiculous goal. Still, I figured everyone was surrounded by mechanization that tried to appear human. The unabashed mechanization of my art should have come across as authentic in contrast.

I was broadcasting *The Quest(ion?)* to people whose mediated lives had reached a crisis. I couldn't ask for a better audience. These people needed the truth. I wanted to make a

breakthrough with the constipated and hemorrhaging . . . Instant Labor's most reliable clients.

The callers just wanted their medications, and my film was mistaken for a computer error.

My broadcast was cut short. Ten hours of the epic brought such an onslaught of complaint calls that the supervisor was forced to track down the problem. This sent him into such a panic that in the end my whole row was shut down.

"All right, what's going on here?" the supervisor asks.

The instant laborers are sluggish, and as we wipe the drool from our mouths and slowly try to sit up, the supervisor starts down the row. He leans the dazed operators against the wall, and clumsily finishes us. Finding nothing, and faced with a crew that is growing more alert by the second, the supervisor retreats back to his office.

I find my legs and follow him. The supervisor's office is encased in reflective glass; mirrored windows all the way around this management structure inside the laborers' basement workshop reflect the situation back to me.

My face looks sunken, bruised, wasted. It looks like I haven't changed my gray pajamas in weeks. I look up above the office door, read the company logo stenciled there in crooked red letters.

"Instant Labor."

myself. I bundle up the photos and dump them.

I knock on the office door and wait as the supervisor scurries to answer.

"You . . ." the supervisor says. He is red-faced, breathing hard, and sweating. His spectacles are perched on the tip of his nose, and he pushes them back into place reflexively. "You," he says, and glances down at his clipboard, "number six, Webb Little."

"Yes," I reply.

"What do you want?"

"Do you have a pair of scissors I can borrow?" I ask.

"Today's your last day." The supervisor is reading from his clipboard.

"A pair of scissors," I say.

"That was some stunt, Mr. Little."

I hold out my hand, waiting.

The supervisor closes the door and then opens it again. He hands me a pair of scissors with large orange handles.

I pinch my eyelashes and fold back the lid. The instant-jack is tiny, but months of practice makes it easy to grab the jack and pull it forward.

My eye sears with pain as I maneuver the blades of the scissors up against the lens of my eye and cut the jack out.

"That's expensive equipment, Mr. Little. You'll have to reimburse us for it," the supervisor says. "I may be able to salvage it, and bring down the cost." He holds out his hand.

Blood runs down my cheek, and I step back holding the jack in my puppet-hand. I cover my eye, cup my palm over my puppet-wound, and turn my puppet-self away, and run.

Scene 16

Epilogue

The Quality Pie is crowded with hungry customers, and my puppet-self is surrounded by consumption. I watch as it sits down at the counter and orders a cup of coffee.

The waitress has her long black hair pulled back in a bun and is moving back and forth behind the counter without hesitation.

"I just wanted more time," my puppet-self says. He reaches out and touches the waitress's arm as she shuffles past.

"I'll be right with you," the waitress says.

"I just wanted more time. You understand that, don't you?"

The waitress walks out of the frame, and my puppet-self is left alone to sip his coffee. I zoom in on the puppet's hand, on the instant-jack it is holding delicately between its thumb and forefinger.

"I'm instant," it says. It stands up from the counter, and I pan with it as my puppet-self moves to the register to pay.

The waitress rings up its bill, and it pays in cash. My puppet-self leans in, whispering into the waitress's ear.

"I'm sorry."

And the puppet puts its hand over the tip jar and lets go. The small, red, electric nub lands without a sound among the dollar bills and change. ♣



about the author

Douglas Lain's life began in Memphis, Tennessee.

He claims to have been born on the steps of Grace-land, although his mother recalls a hospital birth. Lain currently lives in Portland, Oregon, with his wife and two children.

He attended Clarion West in 1995, is currently a member of an Internet writer's workshop called FOG, and holds a bachelor's degree in philosophy.

Lain reports that his short stories, essays, rants, and agitprop have appeared in a variety of obscure journals, magazines, and pamphlets, as well as on telephone poles and bus station walls all over Oregon.

This is his first professional sale.



about the illustrator

Artist and illustrator John Jude Palencar won his first art award when he was just eleven years old.

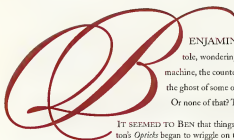
Since then, he has collected more than two hundred such honors, including two Gold Book Awards from Spectrum and the Silver Medal from the Society of Illustrators. His work has appeared on hundreds of covers for authors such as H. P. Lovecraft, Ursula Le Guin, Marion Zimmer Bradley, Octavia Butler, and Stephen King.

Jude also is developing a body of fine art, which he plans to include in a volume of his selected works.

Can young Ben invent a way to make two
women happy at the same time?
It's hard to see how.

An Air of Deception

BY J. GREGORY KEYES



BENJAMIN FRANKLIN stared at the glowing point of the kraftpistole, wondering why he was about to die. Was it the matter of the air-eating machine, the countess, the marquise, the army of Turks besieging the city? Or was it the ghost of some older sin, come to haunt him?

Or none of that? The fellow might be merely mad. What a comfort that would be.

IT SEEMED TO BEN that things first went wrong when the lines of the fourth *question* in Newton's *Opticks* began to wriggle on the page like dancing centipedes. When his knees wobbled and a singing began in his ears—perhaps the music the letters were gamboling to—he was fairly sure of it. His lungs worked like blacksmith's bellows, but he felt as if he were underwater, each deep breath drawing darkness up through the capillaries that fed his spinning brain.

He turned back toward the coppered ball-and-rod device he had engaged moments before, the experiment he had just decided was a failure. It still wasn't doing what he wanted, but it was doing *something*, sure enough. Something unhealthy. He stepped to shut it off, but folded like a puppet strung with wet noodles. A dull snacking sound turned out to be his face hitting the floor.

Things were generally worse, Ben deduced, nearer the machine. That made sense, so he crawled away from it, felt a bit stronger, managed to find his feet again and stumble to the door. The door, which normally swung readily inward, this time resisted his insistent tug before reluctantly sighing open. As he stumbled through, the room behind him exhaled into the hall and blew the portal shut.

In the ancient stone hallway of Prague Castle, he heaved deep breaths that finally sustained, and thanked the god of the solar system—he figured no higher power was likely listening—for another moment of benevolence to Ben Franklin. Though only sixteen, he was already deeply in debt to some god or other, and he might as well acknowledge it.

He patted his head gingerly, waiting for it to clear, hoping it would, that whatever had gone wrong with his experiment hadn't damaged his thinker.

A few moments later, feeling a bit better, he ventured cautiously back to the door. Pushing it, he encountered the peculiar resistance again, and when it cracked, another breeze blew through—an odd thing, from a room with no windows or ventilation.

The breeze tasted like nothing—an odd scent, nothing. But a breath of it brought dizziness back. He hastily slammed the portal again.

"Mr. Franklin?" The voice issued from the next apartment, twenty feet down the hall. "Is that my' prentice I hear out there, banging about?"

"Yes, Sir Isaac," he shouted.

"Come here, please."

Ben cast another worried look at the door to his room, produced a key, and locked it. Then he hurried to answer the command—the last thing he needed right now was Sir Isaac coming after him.

"Sir?" Sir Isaac's quarters were open, so he peeked in.

The philosopher looked up from rummaging through papers on his writing desk, but his gaze went somewhere beyond Ben. "I want to alert you, Mr. Franklin, that we are to appear before Prince Eugene of Savoy in the Mathematical Tower to discuss our latest contrivances. He is just returned from the battlefield—it seems an army of

ILLUSTRATION BY
DIYERLIZZI



Turks marches to lay siege to the city. . . . Good heavens, lad, what's wrong with you?" Newton's ancient eyes were suddenly microscopes, focused on Ben at last. They were the only obviously ancient things about him—though a man of some eighty-odd years, his chestnut hair and leau, uninked face suggested he was no more than twenty. Being the greatest scientific philosopher in the world had its benefits.

But his eyes were old-man eyes, bruised by the light of too many days, followed by the fierce intelligence behind them.

"Not a thing, sir. I s'pose I'm out of breath from rushing over here."

"It did not seem to me you rushed."

"What's this about the Turks, sir?"

Newton's natural frown developed a suspicious wrinkle, but he did not pursue the matter. "It seems that the Sultan is not content with Vienna and Hungary, but is intent upon conquering the whole of the empire. It also seems that I am expected to put a stop to his designs—naturally." He reached for his deep red frock coat and settled it upon his shoulders. The color perfectly matched the waistcoat and knee breeches he was already wearing.

To varying degrees, it also matched the vermilion chair, the sanguine carpet, the scarlet tapestries, and the portraits on the wall. The portraits were of Sir Isaac, one depicting him in a carmine dressing gown, the other in a crimson justacorps.

To say that Sir Isaac was partial to red was to say that the sea was wet.

The magus frowned at Ben. "You aren't going dressed like that?"

Ben glanced down at his work clothes—a faded pair of blue knee breeches, a waistcoat missing several buttons, a linen shirt with several yellowish spatters upon it.

Sir Isaac waved him away. "We have a moment or two. Go dress more presentably."

"Ah . . ." Could he hold his breath long enough to change clothes? Of course not. But he couldn't tell Sir Isaac that something was wrong, either. "Sir, suppose I go like this, as if for work? After all, Prince Eugene will want to see that you've kept your 'prentice industrious."

Sir Isaac looked him up and down dubiously. "Well," he murmured, "is not as if we're going to see the emperor, and Prince Eugene often keeps company with soldiers. Very well—as you are, then."

PRINCE EUGENE of Savoy, the greatest general in all of Europe—possibly the world—was a slim, short, slightly hunchbacked man in his late forties. Despite this, he impressed. To Ben he seemed a live blade of steel, flickering around the room in search of a duel to fight.

Just now he was in a rare moment of stillness—a sword not actually sheathed, but merely raised to en garde, almost humming with anticipation of the first attack. He gazed out the broad windows of the tower at the iron-gray Moldau River and the haunted, misty spires and rooftops of Prague beyond. A mildew-scented breeze seeped through the open window, and in the distance, as if from deep underwater, the clock in Old Town marked the hour as the cloud-swallowed sun did not.

"How good to finally meet you, Sir Isaac," the prince said,

not quite turning toward them. "The emperor is enthusiastic about you, and I know it is not without reason. Of course, how could you fail to impress, arriving from the ruin of the West in a flying ship, your age turned back some sixty years?"

Ben flinched at the subtle suspicion infecting the words. Only slightly, but Savoy noticed his distress—a thin smile told Ben so. *There is something more here to know*, the sallow grin said. *I will find you in time, apprentice. If your master will not talk, then you will. In time.*

All that in a single twitch of the lips. Ben hoped his gulp was not audible.

"I must admit," the prince went on, fingering the spalled rim of a crucible, "that I attempted to read your *Opticks* and your *Principia*. But I am a poor soldier, my mind unsuited to the subtleties of your arguments. I once met Gottfried Leibniz, in Vienna—yes, I know you had your differences, but he was still a great man, you agree? I asked him to distill his philosophies to a few sentences that a soldier might understand. He wrote me a ninety-paragraph treatise on his theory of monads, which I have yet to fully comprehend. Can you do better, Sir Isaac?"

Newton cleared his throat, glanced about the room as if he might find some simple cloquence in the alchemical furnace, beakers, or half-finished devices of wire and brass.

"It is difficult to put briefly," he admitted. "I am accustomed to the leisure of wordiness. Perhaps I should begin with the theory of matter?"

The prince pointed to the steady, lemony glow of an alchemical lantern on a nearby bench. "If it explains *that*, and the fervetactum with which we boil the blood of our enemies, my krapfistoles, the Fahrenheit cannon and fire drakes I use in my campaigns. All are said to extend from your discoveries."

Newton nodded, to himself really. Ben could almost see the master's gaze turning inward, to that vast palace of science inside his brain, the distant place where he lived so much of his life.

That place where he invited no one, even the 'prentice who scrubbed his glassware, damn him.

"Matter is composed of particles called atoms, and those atoms are of four sorts or natures—gas, lux, dammatum, and phlegm. My discoveries are to do with how these atoms come together to form the substances we know—and how they change or vegetate from one to the other. To understand that, we must make recourse to certain forces—harmonies and affinities."

"Like gravity, or magnetism?"

"Of course—the prince is informed, after all."

"Do not read too much into me," Savoy cautioned. "Perhaps it were best—yes, could your apprentice finish the explanation?"

"Of course, Your Highness. Mr. Franklin?"

"Ah." Ben's mind had wandered back to his apartment and the problem it posed—and to the desires that were at the root of it all. In particular to a certain pair of very young, very charming ladies. "Ah," he repeated. "Well, yes. Until Sir Isaac's discoveries, gravity and magnetism and the like were thought caused by particles of matter—gravity, for instance, was believed due to small, invisible particles bombarding the Earth and pressing things down. Magnetism was explained by numerous small screws, turning about the magnet and drawing objects into it. But no such particles exist—both of these affini-

ties are due to immaterial, occult forces, which propagate through an aether not of matter but of a medium which conducts sympathies, attractions and repulsions. Certain arrangements of these forces—ferments—draw matter into them in specific ways. The ferment of iron, for instance, attracts just the right number of lux and damnatum atoms into it to form that substance—rather like a loom that weaves only a single pattern and seeks the thread to weave it."

"There is, then, a ferment for this castle, for that beaker, for each of us?"

"No, Highness. There are ferments for lead, for gold, for copper, and so on. These in turn build actual objects."

"And where do these ferments come from? When you speak of weaving, a design is implied, and a designer."

"Indeed, Your Majesty. We must assume God created ferments and maintains them by divine will."

"Your universe, then, is not the Godless machine of Descartes?"

"No, Highness, not at all. The planets are proof that Descartes was mistaken. Each heavenly body perturbs the others, and in time they should become so perturbed as to crash together or fall into the sun. It is evident that small corrections must be made to the system, now and then, to prevent this. Only God could do that. And where else would a force like gravity come from?"

Savoy knotted his hands behind his back and paced. "So you confirm what I knew as a child—God is real. Tell me something I do not know. What has all this to do with my magical gun, here?" He parted the black iron krapfipistole thrust in his sash.

"Well, as these ferments are made of aetheral forces, and as these forces can be manipulated, we can thus manipulate matter. Your krapfipistole has a charge of iron—its mechanism alchemically liberates the lux atoms from the metal, so that it decomposes. The lux, bound with aer from the atmosphere around us, forms a stream of phlogiston, which is much like lightning."

"So you can change one substance to another? Lead into gold, for instance?"

"In theory, Prince. In practice, the ferments of lead and gold must be mathematically described, then a catalyst or menstruum devised which will mediate the change—"

"And now, as was probably inevitable, the argument becomes incomprehensible to me," the Prince of Savoy interrupted. "But in essence, while you might theoretically make any one thing into any other, in practice you have discovered only a few such transformations?"

"Exactly, Highness. Our lanterns produce light by liberating lux from crystal. The fervefactum changes the state of water from liquid to steam—and as blood contains an abundance of water, it serves to guard this city against the Turk."

"Yes, and that brings us to the practical matter at hand. The range of the fervefactum is grievously small—the enemy must approach within less than a hundred feet for it to work at all. We know that the French developed cannon whose shells seek out the active principle of the fervefactum as a hound follows a

scent, and we know that Louis XIV, damn his eyes, gave that secret over to the Turk. So our chief defense against siege is worthless. What have you devised in lieu of it? The Turk has little pleasant planned for us, I fear. I have heard, in particular, that their religion prescribes hideous tortures for philosophers like yourself, and God knows they have no love of me. So we are in the same leaky boat, my friends. What are we to do?"

Sir Isaac nodded sagely. "I have some ideas, Majesty, if you would like to hear them."

"I would like that very much."

AFTER THAT, Ben allowed his mind to slip off again as Sir Isaac described their inventions. He gathered, absently, that the prince was not very much impressed, and Ben agreed silently that he should not be. Mostly, Newton's ideas were not new inventions at all, but minor modifications of old ones. Ben was hard-pressed to understand it—Newton spent all of his time in the laboratories, working. But on what? Nothing very useful, it seemed.

The prince left, discouraged, and Newton put Ben to work cleaning beakers that were already—to his eye—well scrubbed. Newton's mood was no better than the prince's, but after a time Ben figured he ought to bring up something his master hadn't mentioned to Savoy.

"Sir, what of the aegis? Couldn't we modify it so as to protect the city?"

Newton glared at him. "We've talked about this before, Benjamin."

"Yes, sir, but I still don't understand it. Your aegis renders you invisible and guards you from both bullet and phlogiston. Wouldn't it be the perfect device for defending the city?"

"It would if one could be built so large, but it is impossible."

"Sir, with all due respect, I don't see why."

"You understand how the aegis works?"

"No, sir, because you have never published it to me."

"Correct. Nor do I desire to. Nor do I wish you working at it yourself, do you understand?"

"No, sir, frankly I do not."

"Well, then—it is sufficient that you obey."

"Yes, sir."

He thought about his room again, hoping that no one had tried to enter it. If Newton found out that Ben had been disobeying him for weeks now, there would be a large tide to pay to hell, and Ben would be the coin of choice.

Newton left soon thereafter, and Ben slipped off as soon as he thought it safe. He had appointments in the afternoon, and much to do before.

He reached his room about four, and opened the door with some trepidation. He didn't see any corpses inside, which was a relief, but a quick sip though his nose proved the air still fouled. He retreated back to the hall and inhaled deeply a few times—he had been a renowned swimmer in his native Boston—took a final lungful and reentered his quarters.

He found the device—a copper-sheathed sphere, mounted like a candied apple on a catalyzing rod—and quickly disengaged it.



*Wouldn't it be
the perfect device for
defending
the city?*

He returned to the corridor for another breath, rushed back into the room, quickly selected a coat, waistcoat, breeches, and shirt from his closet, then hurried back out. He could return for shoes and hose. Anyway, now that the device was shut off, the air would soon return to normal. He left his door open a crack so good air could come back in, then ducked down the hall and into the corner of a stairwell to change.

He was mostly done when he heard a soft laugh and a rustle of skirts on the stairs.

"Oh, dear," a feminine voice purred. "You weren't waiting for me like that, were you?" He glanced up to see a girl in a deep green gown glide from the landing, pale gold hair caught up in a tower of elaborate combs.

"C-Countess Sternberg?" Ben stuttered, pulling his knee breeches the rest of the way up. "I was expecting to meet you on the Powder Bridge, a half-hour hence."

"Did you have an earlier appointment with someone else, here in the stairwell?" she asked sharply, both hands thrusting akimbo on her impossibly thin waist, eyes flashing like emerald lanterns. She was beautiful, the countess, a year younger than he, with a mouth that needed kissing and a body that needed...

"No—no, of course not, my lady. It is just that, ah—the maid was in my room and I was, ah—modest..."

"So you chose, rather, to dress in public."

"Um... yes."

"What a funny little Englishman you are. It's no wonder I am so taken with you."

"Well," Ben replied. His pants were buttoned now, freeing up his arms so he could reach for her tiny hand. "If I am forgiven for startling you, perhaps we could discuss other things. For instance..." He bent to kiss her, got close enough to feel the warmth of her breath, almost taste the ruby prize, before her finger suddenly interposed itself.

"Haven't you forgotten something?" she asked, her voice low and breathy.

"Not at all, Countess. I was working on it only a moment ago."

"And when will it be ready? I *must* have it for the ball in two days' time. Can you imagine how it will be when I magically appear in the middle of the floor, with none having seen me enter? It will be the most remembered entrance of all time. And that selfish bitch, the Marquise de Rialp, will faint from envy."

"Indeed," Ben replied, feeling a little bead of sweat start on his brow. "It just needs a little perfecting, is all. And I need, perhaps, a little inspiration..." He puckered his lips again.

"I want to see it. Is it in your room?"

"Yes, but I prefer to have it working before I show it off."

"Hmhm. But I wish to see it *now*. I might show you a thing or two in return..."

That sounded damn good to Ben, who had imagined much but seen little of what the countess's rich raiment hid. She was, after all, not a serving maid, and he must take care that such liberties came from her and not him.

The tiny part of his brain that could still think reminded him that his room was probably still uninhabitable, however.

"My room is still being swept. Isn't there somewhere else..."

"I'm beginning to think you aren't terribly interested in me," the countess said, with an air of speculation.

"Impossible!" Ben replied. "The truth is, to have your gown of invisibility done in time, I must deny myself even my heart's desire, which is nothing more than to spend time in your presence. I hope you understand."

"Well," she said, looking sideways. "How sweet, and very worthy! But afterward I hope you will have time for your... heart's... desire."

"It is not to be doubted," he assured her.

"Here's something to remember, then." And she kissed him—a sweet, warm kiss that did not linger nearly long enough.

"Now," she went on, as their lips parted, "take that as the smallest taste of what is to come—when my gown is done."

"Thank you, Countess. Already I am blessed. Another kiss from you would make me a saint."

"I have no use for a saint," she said primly. "My sorcerer's apprentice will do, when the time is right."

With that, she went back up the stairs, pausing to lean over the rail and wave in such a way as to present the little apples of her cleavage to best advantage.

When she was gone, he hurried back to his room, certain that *this* time he would be able to recreate Sir Isaac's segis. He must!

When he found a servant sleeping in the hall, he gathered something was wrong. When his head went all strange again, he knew it.

He rushed to the open door of his room and slammed it. Almost immediately, the air tasted better, but he had to retreat some thirty or forty feet before it filled his lungs properly.

Thanking God—with his usual caveat—that the servant was still alive, Ben brought him around. "There's a good fellow," he said when the young man's eyes fluttered open.

"Eh?" A look of sheerest confusion colored the gray-green eyes. "I—I weren't drinking, sir, I swear it. I was just"—he blinked—"I don't rightly know what. But it *burnt*." He rubbed his head.

"You'll be okay. Just stay clear of these rooms for the time being, yes?"

"Yes, *mh*," the boy replied, in a you-don't-have-to-tell-me-twice tone.

Poor fellow, Ben thought as the man stumbled shakily off. *He doesn't have the faintest idea what happened to him.*

Any more than Ben did. So much for education.

He paced in the hall, thinking. Clearly the device, though disassembled, was still working. It shouldn't be, so it must not be working as he imagined it would. The segis he was trying to duplicate bent any particle that approached in an arc about it, up to and including the little bullets that made up light. Luxacules went halfway around and then continued on, more or less in the same line they had been in, creating the illusion of invisibility that the countess desired, and which he had rashly promised her. He had thought himself on the right track with his ball-and-rod device, but instead of turning light, it seemed



*She was beautiful,
the countess, with a
mouth that needed
kissing...*

to be instead generating some poisonous gas, which meant he was very far indeed from his goal.

He needed fresher air. He needed to think, to find his friend Robert and talk things over in English, maybe with a beer to oil his brain's machinery.

Holding his breath, he went back into his room, got shoes, stockings, and a greatcoat. He closed the door and locked it, and on second thought sought out the maid who cleaned his rooms—a winsome strawberry blonde—and warned her not to let anyone enter.

"A crucial experiment," he told her. "Anyone who gazes within the room will be transmogrified instantly to stone. Poor Stefan only stood too near, and you may have heard what happened to him. Do not speak of it, and warn all other servants away."

"Yes, Your Honor," she told him. "But how shall I do both? That is, not speak of it and warn people away?"

"Ah." He dipped into his pocket and withdrew a silver coin, pressed it into the girl's palm. "Keep all away, but do not speak of this to Sir Isaac, I should say."

"Thank you, sir."

"Your hair is most delightful. Have you thought of putting it up in a comb?"

She curtsied, but did not blush. "I don't have one, sir."

"A pity. I'll see if I can do something about that."

He strode out of the palace into the third courtyard of the castle. A drizzly rain was falling, frying the golden light of the outside lanterns into jagged globes that illuminated very little. Saint Vitus's Cathedral rose above him, all black dragons' teeth and insect stings against the faded sky. He paced around it, going vaguely toward the Mathematical Tower, but in the end straying toward the Powder Bridge, thinking to look down into the stag moat and see what creatures roamed it today.

"Good day, sir," a guard called as he walked past.

"Good day."

"I was wondering, sir..."

"Yes?" He paused in his journey.

"There's this lady down in Old Town..."

Ben smiled indulgently. "If you want love potions, go to the warlocks on Golden Lane. I've not yet put love on scientific footing."

"Ah, that's a pity, sir." The fellow looked a little crestfallen.

"Yes, isn't it?" Ben agreed. "But when I do, you will be one of the first to know, I promise."

The fellow brightened. "Well, thank you, sir."

Ben continued on, but he hadn't gone twenty steps when a different voice chimed behind him, this one purest silvery music.

"Is that my dear sorcerer?"

He turned to find a young woman regarding him, protected from the rain by a dwarf wielding a very long-handled umbrella.

"Marquise de Rinal! How are you this night, milady?"

"Delighted, I must say, to find you so early for our appointment."

"Oh." Ben said—he had entirely forgotten his second appointment—it takes me some time to prepare my mind to converse with you, Marquise. I wasn't expecting you for two hours. What brings you out so early in this dreadful weather?"

She sidled nearer and spoke in confidential tones. "I heard a rumor that the Countess Sternberg was come down here to meet some lover of hers. I wanted to catch a glimpse of the poor damned soul, but I see she isn't here. You hadn't heard the same thing, had you?"

"The countess who?" Ben asked, eyes wide and innocent.

The marquise smiled, lighting the night more than the lantern her dwarf clutched in his other hand. She was much the opposite of the countess—her hair was long and black as jet, her eyes inkwells, her Neapolitan blood telling. She was tall, almost as tall as he was, and if her waist wasn't as wasp-thin as the countess's, its ampleness extended to other places to keep the proportions most pleasing.

"Never mind. Do you find yourself displeased to meet early with me? Is your mind not prepared?"

"Quite the contrary. I congratulate myself on my good fortune, even if it means I find my tongue a bit stupid."

"How flattering," she said, moving near to take his arm. The dwarf, chuffing, waddled along, trying to keep the umbrella over them both. The scent of her—and the heat that steamed through the fabric of her dress where they touched—made him almost as light-headed as the bad air had earlier. "I was wondering," she mused, as they strolled into the gusts that buffeted the narrow bridge, "if you had anything to tell me about... the invention we discussed."

"Yes, of course," he said. "Work proceeds well."

"How wonderful! Then I shall have my invisible gown before the ball?"

"It is a certainty, Marquise."

"Well. Perhaps afterward I will show you my own invention—a very different sort of invisible gown."

His tongue tried to swallow itself.

HE BEGGED his leave of the marquise and exited the castle, wending down the steep, rain-slicked street to nearby Kleinstadt, the quarter of town where mostly rich and mostly foreign merchants live, in search of his friend Robert. He found him readily enough in the tavern of Saint Thomas, already about five pints deep into the tavern's own brew.

"Ben! Sit y'rself down, have a pint." Robert was a few years older than Ben, his long auburn hair bound with a black ribbon, his eyes pure green mischief.

"Don't mind if I do, Robert."

"Say, I thought y' were t' rendezvous with that mark-wess right about now."

"I've already seen her, and the countess too."

"Oh, dear. Have the two o' them discovered each other?"

"No, Gl'lor it, but it's only a matter of time," said Ben dolefully. "They've both extracted the same promise from me. If I manage to keep it, then they'll both know. If I don't..."

"Don't this sort o' fall into the damned if you do t' don't care-goy?" Robert asked.

"Ah... yes."

Robert raised his beer. "Well, here's t' bein' damn glad I'm no genius, then. I haven't the brains t' get myself in such a pickle."

"Ah, hush up, you blockhead. You're supposed to help me see a way out of this."

"Oh. Well, how's this? When the ship is sinking—jump off!"

"Easy to say, Robin. But I'm so *close*. The countess kissed me today, and the marquise was fetching sweet—"

"Ben, I advise y' t' stick t' y'r own class. Those highborn lasses can quite take y'r head—I mean in *fact*, not in literary fashion. Displease 'em at y'r peril."

Ben shrugged. "That's by-the-by. I've got worse troubles with Sir Isaac, if he ever catches on. And I'll remind you—if I either lose my head or my 'prenticeship, you'll be out of employment as well. You're supposed to be my bodyguard—guard it!"

"Well, lay it all out, then."

So Ben did, over two pints of beer.

"So this invention of yours was meant t' repel bits of light?" Robert asked, when he was done.

"Yes, or bend them about, rather. I thought myself on the right track—now I've no idea what to do."

"Well, f'r starters, best toss that thing over the wall before someone suffocates near y'r room."

"I can't. When I opened my door, the effect began creeping out. How far might it creep? It might poison the whole world if I put it out."

"Surely 'tis not so bad," Robert said.

"Who knows? But look, it's not just for these two women I'm doing this. You mustn't think that. We need the aegis. We have enemies who can call comets down from the sky! And even now the Turk is at the gate, did you know? Or almost, and how to turn their shells? The aegis could do it."

"Which Sir Isaac knows. There must be good reason—"

"He might be mad," Ben said quietly.

"What?"

"He might be mad again. It's happened before, and you know what the result of that was. I cannot trust him, Robin."

"And then there is the matter of the ladies," Robert said, a bit sarcastically.

"Yes. Me and my pride."

"Come, Ben. Get o' o'f y'r cups or further down in, but stop *whining* so. Do something! What's this thing of yours doing? What if it is repelling something? The air, maybe?"

"No, that would make a sort of vacuum which—" He stopped, staring at his beer, at the foam slowly subsiding on it. "Unless—unless the air is made of different things, some nourishing and some not."

"Eh?"

"Robin, if you weren't so damn ugly, I'd kiss you."

"Why? Does that help?"

"In part, maybe. In part." He took another gulp of beer. "I have to go. See to my bill?"

The race back up the hill pumped all the beer into his head, so by the time he reached the castle he was feeling pretty well disposed toward the world. If he was on the right track after all, it might be that it would only require a few adjustments to make things right.

Approaching his door, still trying to work out how he would make those adjustments without breathing, he heard the hammer cock back on a pistol.

"Stand quiet," a muffled voice said. "Raise your voice above a whisper, and I'll make a louder noise than you will like."

Ben turned slowly. There stood a man all in black satins, with

a black mask and kerchief over his face and a small tricorn pulled snug down to it. That held less of his attention than the ugly iron point of the man's krapfipistole, which was pointed at his heart.

And he wondered why he was about to die.

"I'VE NOT MUCH money on me," Ben managed to say.

The fellow said something too muffled to understand.

"Sorry?" Ben said.

His attacker pulled down the kerchief that covered his mouth. "I have no care about that. I've come for your invention."

"Which invention?"

"The invisible ball-gown invention, of course."

"Oh. Dear."

"It's in your room, is it not?"

"It is, but—well, it doesn't exactly work."

"I'll be the judge of that, I think. Take me to it, and be quiet, like I said. And make no move to enchant me. The instant I feel enchantment at work, I'll shoot you quite dead."

He sounded like he meant it, and that presented a few problems.

"Look—" Ben began.

"Unlock the door, and let us in. Now."

Ben sighed. "If you insist. But I warn you, my room is full of all sorts of enchantment."

"You'll warn me of anything that might hurt me, or by God you will regret it," the fellow promised.

"No doubt." Ben unlocked the door and held it open. There was almost no breeze at all this time.

"After you," the man said.

Ben took a deep breath, trying not to be obvious about it, and walked in. He went to the table as quickly as he could.

"Is that it?" the man asked, pointing at the ball.

Ben nodded.

"Show me how to work it—no, wait, I—"

Sure enough, the man was starting to sway. There must be almost no nourishment left in the air. Ben's lungs were starting to ache for breath, but the other fellow was clearly worse off. Which was good, except for one thing.

"I warned you!" the thief gasped.

Up came the pistol. Down came the hammer as Ben threw himself violently to one side.

He hit a bookshelf, twisted, and landed badly. He scrambled back wildly and helplessly watched the man advance, reset the trigger and pull once more.

The point glowed, a spark leaped. That was all.

The man reset the hammer again, then wobbled slowly to the floor.

Silently thanking the solar-system god again, Ben used what strength he had to run from the room.

He plowed headlong into Prince Eugene of Savoy.

THE PRINCE PACED back and forth in the narrow room, eyes flashing like a hawk's.

"Very well, 'prentice," he said, his voice low, "Now we can have our conversation where no one will hear, least of all your master. Tell me what is wrong with the air in your room."

"Sir . . ." He took a deep breath and began again. "Sir Isaac invented a device he calls the *aegis*. 'Tis a sort of shield which

makes one invisible and turns all sorts of attacks away from its wearer."

"Why haven't I heard about this?"

"I don't know. He will not give me the secret of it, and so I tried to invent it on my own. I thought, you see, to improve it so as to protect the city. Instead, I seem to have invented something that repels that part of the atmosphere which sustains life—and, incidentally it seems—the operation of knifepistoles."

"Very well. And this fellow? You, unmask yourself."

The man in black, disarmed, reached hesitantly for his mask and removed it, staring defiantly at the both of them.

"Count Stella?" Savoy said, his voice flat.

"Sir, that's why I suggested we hold this discussion in private," Ben replied. "I suspected some young nobleman was involved."

"You have good instincts, apprentice. Stella? What do you have to say for yourself?"

Stella, a year or so older than Ben, turned his somewhat lopsided face to Savoy, but his only reply was a shrug.

Ben cleared his throat. "Sir, if I may?"

"You may."

"Count Stella—which one of them put you up to it? The countess or the marquise?"

Stella's jaw dropped. "How did you know?"

"No one else would have called it my 'invisible ball-gown device' but one of them. Which one got impatient?"

"The countess."

"Ah."

"And the marquise."

Now it was Ben's turn to gape. "The both of them?"

Stella uttered a remorseful little sob.

"You were playing the same game as me!" Ben said. "Courting them both!"

Stella nodded miserably.

"Am I to understand," Prince Eugene said dangerously, "that this has to do with you two idiots scheming at women?"

"It seems so, sir."

"I love them," Stella said defensively. "Both of them. And they both suspected the traitorous Mr. Franklin was making a gown for the other. They are both proud, sir, and neither was willing to see the other match her at the ball."

"So each sent you to assassinate me? Without knowledge of the other?"

"I never planned to do that! I was only to take the device and frighten you."

"You tried to shoot me!"

"I thought you were killing me with some enchantment!"

"Both of you shut up," Savoy snapped, rubbing his temples. The two boys fell silent, each studying the floor.

"Here," Savoy said after a moment, "is how it will go. Stella, no matter who your father is, if the emperor discovered that you threatened even the apprentice of his court sorcerer, he would at the very least have you whipped. Normally I would condone that—in fact, I would have both of you whipped in public—but you the more, Stella, as you are a noble and ought

to damn well know how to behave."

"Yes, Your Highness."

"But in these times, punishing you might foment unrest among the nobles—not the least your doting father—and I think Prague cannot stand more strife inside, not with the Turk knocking on our gates. So I'm going to prescribe another punishment."

And so he did.

BEN LOOSENED HIS steinkirk and leaned against an ornate chairback, surveying the ballroom. It was quite a sight, a gallery full of silk and satin gowns and gold-braided suits. Even their masks were elegant affairs of silver scale or bejeweled velvet—each probably cost more than his father's entire house back in Boston.

Now and then, a new lady or gentleman was announced, to hold the stage for a few seconds, absorbing the approval or disdain of their costumes with frozen, manufactured smiles.

Next to Ben, Count Stella wiped beads of sweat from his forehead. Of everyone in the room, only he and Ben wore no masks.

"I don't see why we have to stand together," he muttered. "They are sure to know, then. They will blame me."

"Which is exactly what Prince Eugene wanted," Ben reminded him. "It's our punishment."

"It's no punishment to you," the count accused. "You're enjoying this."

"So I am," Ben replied. "After all, they sent you to steal from me, possibly cause me bodily harm. Amazing how quickly sentiment dissolves in that sort of solvent."

"You never loved them at all."

"Loved them? No, sir, and thank God. Look how they used you, who does love them."

"I cannot bear it. They will see us together and they will know—"

"They would know anyway. They will be well aware that I could have never arranged this, not with the whole court and even their personal servants. I do not run in the circles you and Savoy do, nor have the same sway."

"It was your plan."

"Why, so it was. But Savoy commanded that I conceive a plan with this sort of effect, didn't he? Hsst! There comes one of them! Careful not to look, for Savoy is watching."

It was the countess, who bore the most self-satisfied smile Ben had ever seen on her—which was saying something. He watched her from the corner of his eye.

No one took the slightest notice of her, which, considering her attire, was quite a feat. Her gown was of green satin, but its lines were somewhat spoiled by five concentric hoops of copper tubing sewn to the outside of it from neckline to skirt-fringe. Each hoop had four or five valves fitted around it, and between the valves dangled lenses, plugged glass vials full of colorful liquids, coils of wire that bristled out at odd angles. Two of these last stuck up from her shoulders and into her hair, which was gathered in a sort of Tower of Babylon made of consecutively



*'Tis a sort of
shield which makes one
invisible and turns
attacks away.*

smaller circular metal ribbons. A small, glowing glass globe surmounted it all, so that on the whole she resembled an ornate, upside-down spinning-top.

"How could she wear that?" Ben marveled.

"If it rendered her invisible, as you promised, its ugliness would be overlooked," Stella said despondently.

The court was doing better than Ben ever imagined—but of course, they had been training from infancy for just this sort of spiteful game.

The countess, ecstatic, began wandering around the room, sticking her tongue out at people and making various other rude gestures. Now and then she would bump into someone, who would simply look through her with a puzzled expression. When she tired of that, she moved to the middle of the floor, presumably to make her "entrance."

She began fiddling with the valves, so absorbed in the task that she didn't notice the Marquise de Rialp walk in, wearing an identical gown. The marquise waved her hand in front of the pages who announced entrants to the hall, and looked delighted when they didn't notice her.

An instant later, she noticed the countess, and looked much less delighted.

"You!" she shrieked.

The countess, still twisting at her valves, looking a little concerned that she was still invisible, turned with a look of almost savage satisfaction—until she saw what the marquise was wearing.

At that point, someone giggled. The laugh went around the room like the pox, from one to another, until everyone in the ballroom was infected. Well, everyone but Stella and, of course, the two women, who, after a moment of open-mouthed gaping, began screaming hysterically at one another.

"God help me," Stella moaned.

BEN AND SAVOY stood on the battlement at the south wall. The prince gestured expansively.

"There, you see? Your device turned out to be rather useful after all."

Ben studied the broken landscape, but couldn't make out what the prince meant. "I'm sorry, Your Highness, but I don't see much of anything."

"Exactly. After three assaults on your airless perimeter—did I tell you we discovered the range of the repulsion was a hundred yards, and no more? Well, the Turks didn't know that, of course, they only knew that they kept fainting a few yards in. They've withdrawn! Congratulations, Mr. Franklin. For the time being, you have saved Prague. It's enough for me to forgive you that other little affair."

"I appreciate that, Your Highness."

"You should also know that I have persuaded Sir Isaac to give you the secret of the aegis, that you might perfect it to guard the city as well."

"Um, Your Highness..."

"No, I have forbidden him from punishing you for telling me. I am, after all, a prince. How could you resist my command?"

"Yes, Your Highness." But Ben was quite sure Sir Isaac would invent some devious, subtle method of punishment. Sir

Isaac was good at such things. But that was nothing, if the secret of the aegis was to be revealed to him at last.

Savoy clapped him on the shoulder and left him to contemplate the battle that had never been fought, and Ben left feeling pretty pleased, whistling a tune his father used to play on the fiddle—he had things to do, to accomplish, by heaven.

The first of them would be to stop at a shop in Innsbruck and buy a comb for a certain red-tressed chambermaid. ♣



about the author

J. Gregory Keyes lives too near active monster volcanoes to be entirely comfortable, but otherwise continues to slough through the remains of his tan and settle into life in Seattle, Washington.

In February he finished the last book in his Age of Unreason trilogy and, after more than three years of researching the eighteenth century, finds it inexplicable that knee-length waistcoats, tricornes, and dress coats still have not come back into fashion. He is at least consoled by the fact that, while fencing, he is not only allowed but often required to wear knee breeches.

about the illustrator

Artist/writer Tony DiTerlizzi loves things that are odd and strange. And, though this story is new, it is set in an older time which is right up his alley. It also involves a strange dress which was fun for the model to get comfy in. Look for Tony's picture book debut next year in Jimmy Zangwill's Out-of-this-World Moonpie Adventure from Simon & Schuster. To see more, visit www.diterlizzi.com.



Amazing facts

HUGO GERNSBACH THOUGHT *scientifiction*, the word he coined for science fiction, deserved its own crest. He asked illustrator Frank R. Paul to turn his symbolic word into a work of art. This interesting cover, which appeared in April 1928, is Paul's creation based on a sketch from Gernsback.

The big eye represents the mind's eye and within that is a pictorial presentation of *scientifiction*. But Gernsback wasn't satisfied. He was sure one of *AMAZING Stories'* readers could give the world a much better idea of how *scientifiction* should be drawn. Thus, the contest advertised on this cover.

A few months later, A. A. Kaufman was announced as the winner. Kaufman's crest, which was a combination of his winning entry along with some borrowed aspects of the second- and third-place winners' creations, is seen here. Science is represented by the gear wheel; the pen represents fiction. The frame depicts machinery and the flashes in the central wheel portray electricity. The top of the fountain pen is actually a test tube, which stands for chemistry, and the background of moon, stars, and planets portrays astronomy.



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*The cargo run was going well enough,
until Dev decided he couldn't leave
well enough alone*

The *Wayward Lady* came out of drivespace just inside the Oberon system. Dev had made this trip two dozen times, and he had learned that the best way to get to the planet Leen was to travel slow. Like so many Verge systems, Oberon had its problems, its political unrest, and some very astute pirates. Usually the pirates ignored a slow-moving ship—thinking it not important enough, he guessed—but they didn't always. So he carried extra cargo every time he traveled, expecting to pay tribute either on the way to or from his destination. If he didn't get stopped, he had more to sell.

He glanced at Thenan, the older of his mechaus assistants. Thenan was still connected to the *Lady's* systems, his eyes blank, his circuitry glowing in the command compartment's dim lights. His hands were splayed across his station, gloves off, revealing more circuitry weaving its way through the flesh and bone.

Phiry, the other mechaus on his crew, was in engineering, monitoring the stardrive. It had been acting up lately, and she had been babying it. Dev didn't want to fix it until he had to, hoping he could coax a few more runs out of the *Lady* before he sold her. Then he would retire and live off his earnings.

The rest of the crew was just as human as he was, and not quite as cantankerous. They were belowdecks in their various stations, with the exception of Magda, who sat beside him. She was working her station with her chin resting on her knee, looking like the girl she had once been. Her tight curls were close-cut against her scalp, and they were threaded with silver.

She was his second this trip. He spread the role around, not wanting any of his crew to learn the business as well as he knew it. The more they knew, the more likely they were to throw him out and take his profits. As long as they saw him as the brains, he had nothing to fear. The day that they felt they could outthink him was the day he had to worry about.

So far, he'd seen no signs of it, but he kept looking, just the same.

"Dev," Thenan said. "We have a ship off the port bow."
"Show me," Dev said.

His station's screen flipped open, revealing the magnified image. The screen was his own design, which had been implemented by Phiry. The *Lady* had begun her life as a VoidCorp trader ship, but Dev had modified her into near unrecognizability. The interior was more luxurious than most *Sigurn*-class traders, and the security systems were light-years better.

The view on the screen was of an adrift scout ship. Her hull was intact, but damaged as if she had taken a heavy beating.

"That's strange," Dev said. Most ships left in this part of space were salvaged. Maybe the *Lady* was the first to come upon it.

If that was the case, they may have hit a gold mine. He didn't want to salvage the ship itself, but anything in it would be his for the taking. The best part of it was that he had extra cargo space this trip. He was carrying mostly medical supplies. They didn't bring as much money as computers or electronics—at least not in the

No Good Deed

Oberon system—but they took less space, and weren't quite as attractive to the system's pirates. That was only one of the reasons he dealt in cargo such as medical supplies rather than electronics.

The other was one he would never admit to his crew. He'd been to places where medical supplies were scarce. Those were places he'd like to forget, but he couldn't. Even if he put them out of his conscious mind, they haunted his nightmares.

"How far off course would it take us?" Dev asked.

"Not even enough to register," Thenan said. "That ship's small, and pretty close to us."

"You're thinking of salvage?" Magda had her flipscreen up as well, but she wasn't looking at it. She was staring at the portal before them, which revealed nothing but the darkness of space. "That's a dumb idea. This is probably a trap."

Dev shook his head. "Kind's people don't do that."

He was referring to Thomas Kind, the main pirate chieftain in the Oberon system. Kind didn't like to be called a pirate, though. He preferred to think of himself as a businessman. Kind and Dev had an understanding. Dev never dealt in illegals and always paid the "Kind tax," which was twenty percent of the ship's cargo as a guarantee of free passage. Dev minded, but he never complained.

ILLUSTRATION BY
R K POST

Unlike other traders who fought the tax, believing that no one else was entitled to make money off their work, Dev simply factored the twenty-percent pirate take into his expenses before taking his profit.

Thenan was running scans. "The ship still has one working system. It does not register much heat because it probably does not use much power at all."

"Life support?" Dev asked.

"Yes, the system would appear to be life support."

"You think there are people on that ship?" Magda asked.

"No," Thenan said. "If there were, I believe they would have contacted us by now."

But the ship's having life support made Dev's decision even easier. "Let's check it out," he said.

The gently floating body, which caromed off the floor as

"What if Magda is right? What if it is a trap?" Thenan asked.

Dev chuckled. "Then we pay tribute, just like always. What're you worried about, Thenan?"

"You hired me to do a job," Thenan said, fingers tightening on the display screen. "It did not include salvage."

Mechalus liked order. They liked predictability. Even contract employees, like Thenan, or independents, like Phiry, preferred to know exactly what they'd be doing and in what order for as far into the future as they could see.

"Then you won't salvage," Dev said. "Just get us over there."

IT TOOK TWO HOURS of solid work once they reached the scout before Dev could board. The ship was badly scarred. The damage was odd, though. It didn't seem to have breached the ship's hull, something he would have tried to do if he were in a fight. A hull breach always distracted the crew.

He brought Magda with him, knowing better than to leave his second alone on the ship. He left Rolf in charge of the team, mostly because Rolf could think quickly and take decisive—but prudent—action. Rolf had approached the command chair with the appropriate hesitation, and sat in it only when Dev told him it was all right. Even if that had been an act—and Dev doubted it was, since Rolf's extremely pale skin operated like a window into his mind, flushing red every time Rolf felt he had accidentally insulted someone or made a mistake—it was an act that Dev approved of. He wished the others would pretend that way from time to time.

With the scout adrift and no one to operate the doors, in-space boarding was difficult. Once Dev stepped inside, he felt the low gravity—a sign that life support was failing. Any ship's systems were designed to shut down one by one, from least important to most important. When the gravity went, and it would soon, that left only the heat, the lighting, and the air.

The emergency lights were already on, and the grayness made everything seem slightly dirty. He grabbed a wall handle and walked forward, each movement exaggerated. He hated low-g. He could never decide if walking was easier or if he should launch himself from place to place. In an unfamiliar ship, with strange things on the walls and ceilings, he opted for a handhold and a walk.

Magda followed him. She was wearing boots and had an

emergency kit around her jumpsuit. She had a mass pistol on one hip, a laser pistol on the other. She expected pirates. He didn't.

He headed to the cargo bay. It was small compared to his, but looked larger because it was empty. The handful of storage containers had no lids, and had rolled to the left wall.

But the storage containers weren't what held his attention. The body was.

It was, of all things, a frail wearing diplomatic robes. The alien's thin, delicate body was battered almost to unrecognizability.

Magda took one peek at the body and said, "I don't like this."

"You haven't liked this from the start," he said.

"Let's get off."

"No," Dev said.

"Not going to be any salvage," she said. "At least not any that we can use."

"Check engineering. See if they have anything that'll keep our stardrive working."

She rolled her eyes at him, but did as she was told. He stared into the cargo compartment for a moment. The gently floating body, which caromed off the floor as he watched, made him uneasy. All those demons in the back of his mind rose to the surface.

He'd made the mistake of refusing to pay tribute, years ago, when he ran his first ship. He had been arrogant then, thinking he could handle trading in the Verge with little more than piloting skills. So, when he encountered his first pirates, and they demanded their first tribute, he had refused. They let him pass. When he got his payment and was heading out, they stopped him again. This time, they decided to teach him a lesson.

Tribute wasn't all they wanted. They wanted to teach him a lesson.

He winced and pushed himself away from the cargo doors. He found the ladder leading up to the middle deck. As he was about to pull himself up, Magda whistled.

He followed the sound. She had been peering into a lower weapons rafter—this scout had been heavily modified. A human man was strapped into the seat, his arms resting lightly upon the armrests and his head lolling to one side. Dev was struck, as he always was, at the way that space sometimes mimicked water. If he didn't know better, he would have thought the man was trapped in his chair several meters below the surface of an ocean.

"Another body," Magda said. She touched her laser pistol as she spoke. She was unnerved.

So was he. The floating bodies he remembered were his own crew, whom he'd watched the pirates assassinate in front of him, as a lesson. The pirates had taken everything they could salvage from his ship and disabled most of its systems, leaving him to get home with minimal power and only the bodies of his companions as company.

He had nearly gone crazy.

"Dev," she said softly. "The stardrive and all the functional systems have been deliberately destroyed."

He sucked in a breath. Maybe the oxygen was getting thin.

That was probably good. It limited their time here.

Dev backtracked to the ladder. He gave a small push off the floor, floating halfway through the circular opening, and then used a ladder rung for leverage to propel himself the rest of the way. It might have been his imagination, but it seemed as if the gravity had decreased even more while they had been inside.

He found himself in the mess, where everything was neat. The food was locked in its cupboards as per regulation, and the trays were locked away as well. The scene was normal, except for the body of a t'sa wedged tightly between two chairs.

He moved to investigate the body. The t'sa had been shot at close range by a laser pistol. Someone had to be a very quick and good shot to get a t'sa so accurately. Not only did the shooter have to know t'sa anatomy—deciding where to shoot to avoid

he watched, made him uneasy.

the natural armor plating and the scales was hard enough—but t'sa were quick little things whose movements were impossible to predict.

Magda joined him and let out a small hiss. "Why are we staying here?"

He wasn't sure. All he knew was that he had to examine the entire ship before he could leave.

"Whoever did this may come back." She was clinging to one of the chairs. "I hate pirates anyway. I really hate vindictive ones."

He glanced at her. "I doubt Kind's people did this."

"Then you're a lot more open-minded than I am."

Dev shrugged and didn't say any more. One of the reasons he concentrated on the Oberon system was Thomas Kind. The man had a reputation for being political and genteel. He didn't like to get his hands dirty, at least not obviously. Dev knew that Kind had ordered the deaths of other people—he wasn't above enlisting the services of an assassin occasionally—but Dev knew of none whom Kind had killed himself. Kind was more concerned with protecting his own interests than he was in torture. He also had a reputation for honoring those who respected him.

Dev had counted on that reputation for years.

Magda helped him out of the maze of chairs, and by unspoken agreement they went toward the command center. They wanted to know what they were up against.

In the command center were two dead humans, both strapped to their posts, both shot with a laser pistol. The stench of death pervaded this place: the voided bladders, the iron odor of blood. The bodies were starting to rot. Dev's unsentimental guess put their deaths at least twenty-four hours before.

A scout of this size normally had a crew of five to eight. This one seemed to be running with a fairly small staff. Either that, or some had escaped. Dev checked the pods. None of them was missing. The controls were damaged too, the weapons systems gone. The communications system had also been destroyed, but the computer was still intact.

"Magda," he said. "See how much material you can download from their computer. I want to know what happened here, and who it happened to."

She sighed and touched the controls. "Whatever you say."

"Good."

He left the command center. The door to the captain's quarters was slightly ajar, opening into a well-proportioned stateroom with a wide bed, a table for meetings, and a personal bar/eating station.

He could see no one, but he had an odd feeling that he wasn't alone.

He went in slowly, his pistol out. He saw only one other door, apparently leading to a small closet that was used for personal storage. Dev opened it, then moved backward so fast he nearly hit his head on the wall.

A woman had been crammed into the closet, with her hands and feet bound to its sides. Her head was down, her hair covering her face. She wore a simple black jumpsuit with no markings. She hadn't moved, and even though he could see no wounds, he thought she was dead.

He moved closer, pushed her hair away from her face, and felt the skin of her throat. It was warm. Her heartbeat was steady. He recognized the rings that bound her wrists. They were a part of a ship's warning system, designed to shock someone to wakefulness anytime a problem cropped up with the ship's functions.

Whoever had left her here had done so on purpose, planning for her to suffer a slow and ugly death. She could slip into unconsciousness, but the ship would awaken her each time a system shut off. When the life support went, she would be jolted awake one more time, just so she could suffocate.

He shuddered. Someone had hated this woman. Whatever she had done had been a lot worse than failing to pay tribute.

He glanced at the door, wondering if he should call Magda. If he did, he knew what she would say. *Leave her. You don't know what kind of trouble she'll bring. Besides, remember the credo.*

The credo. It was something he had taught his crew, so that they wouldn't get sidetracked from business.

No good deed goes unpunished.

The sympathy he felt had nothing to do with this woman, and everything to do with his own past. Still, knowing that made little difference. He didn't call Magda because he didn't want to hear her argument.

He couldn't leave the woman here, and live with himself.

"You found something," Magda said from behind him.

"You're not going to like it," he said, and moved away from the storage closet.

She gasped, then glanced at him.

"She's still alive," Dev said. More must have showed on his face, because Magda suddenly looked curious. "Those rings wake her up every time a system goes down."

Magda stared at him. "What do you propose to do about it?"

He didn't answer her, but her face told him she knew what he was going to do.

"No good deed," she warned.

"I know," he said.

"Why don't you just unhook her and fasten her to the bed? Then at least she'd die peacefully."

He turned. "Could you do that?"

Magda swallowed. She had gone pale. "No." Then she took a deep breath. "But we should, you know. We don't need the extra weight, and we don't need the extra problems. Whoever hung her here is a sadistic son of a bitch, the type we don't need to piss off."

"So? He'll never know we helped her."

"Right," Magda said. "And we're going deeper into the Oberon system, not out of it. Maybe whoever did this will see her when we get to Leen."

Dev ran a finger around the top of one of the rings. He felt the slight bump that held the release mechanism. The release required a push of the button, then a squeeze of the material, and another push, not something one could do with bound hands.

The ring opened, and the woman's arm dangled forward in the scout's slight spin. He opened the other ring. Then he crouched.

"Idiot," Magda said. Dev didn't know if she was talking to him or herself.

The woman toppled forward, held in place by her ankles. Magda caught her around the waist.

He released the first ankle ring. "People don't invest this much hate into a human being unless she has some value."

"Yeah, right," Magda said.

"Besides," he said, "didn't you notice the strange crew complement?"

"They weren't dressed like crew," Magda said.

"That's right," Dev said. "But I wasn't talking fashion."

Magda peered at him over the woman's back. "It wasn't your standard mix for a scout crew."

"Or a pirate crew. Or most any other kind of crew. And this isn't a standard ship in any way. It's *plush*."

Magda's eyes narrowed. She obviously didn't know where he was going with this, but she didn't want to ask, to appear as if she lagged behind his reasoning.

"I'll wager they were diplomats," Dev said. "I'll bet this is a Concord ship."

The Galactic Concord was considered by some to be the hope for the future after all the damage caused in the Second Galactic War. It was a confederation of stellar nations, all bound together by the Treaty of Concord. Dev usually ignored it, seeing it as an annoyance, another form of government—only on a galactic scale instead of a planetary one. He knew that the Concord wanted to bring the Verge systems under its control, and he wouldn't be surprised if his hunch about this scout was right.

Magda looked around as if seeing the scout in a whole new way. She frowned once, obviously doubting, and then glanced at him.

He shrugged. "Think about it," he said. "They've opened an embassy on Lison. They want this system. There's a lot of money here that the Concord could use."

Rhodium was a key element in the construction and use of mass reactors and starships. Ever since its discovery in the Oberon system nearly two hundred years earlier, the whole history of the system had been based on greed. It stood to reason that the Concord would want such a rich system as part of its confederation.

"You think they'd send one ship by itself?"

He shrugged. "We don't know if this scout came alone or with others. We won't know anything until this lady wakes up."

"We don't have a med team," Magda said. "She might die anyway."

"She might die after giving us information," Dev said.

Magda grinned. "You are devious."

"What do you think Dev stands for?" he asked.

"I thought it stood for Devon," she said.

He released the other ankle ring. "You thought wrong," he said.

ONCE THE WOMAN was freed, it took only a few moments to get her from the scout to the *Wayward Lady*. Dev put her in his quarters just off the command center, and had Wills, his only medically trained crew member, examine her.

Then he went to the command center. Rolf was standing in the back. Thenan was at his station, and Phiry was in Dev's chair, her long legs stretched before her, her hands threaded behind her head, revealing the circuitry woven in the underside of her upper arms. Her eyes were an appraising gray that had always struck Dev as lifeless and unseeing, even though she had perfect vision.

"I have gone through the download. Nothing has invaded our systems."

"There were viruses?"

"Three protective viruses," she said. "I disabled them all."

"And she's quite proud of herself, too," Rolf said.

"Do you want to know what we found?" Phiry asked.

"A Concord ship."

Her grin faded as she looked over his shoulder at Rolf. "You told him."

"Nope," Rolf said.

"I guessed," Dev went to his seat and put a hand on it, a silent demand that Phiry move. "It looked too new to be out here, and you don't normally find humans, a *vis*, and a frast traveling together outside of a Concord ship."

"If you are that smart," Phiry said as she got out of his chair, "you do not need to know what else I learned."

She wanted him to beg. He sat. He wouldn't beg. "Tell me if you want, Phiry, otherwise I'll look at the manifest myself."

She shrugged, an elegant movement of one strong shoulder.

"They went to Leen."

"Leen?" That startled him. "Not Lison?"

The Concord had categorized the planet Lison—or more

The mystery woman watched

specifically the United Lison State—as independent and was trying to form diplomatic ties. The Concord's new embassy in Lison's capital was just one sign that the Concord believed the planet's wealth would eventually force it to join a stellar nation for protection.

Leen, on the other hand, wasn't yet as rich as Lison, nor as organized. It was still developing. It had rhodium as well, but most of the miners were going to Lison. Dev did most of his business with Leen only because he could get higher prices there. He could see no reason why the Concord was interested in that ugly, mangy little planet.

"Did their computer say why they were there?" he asked.

"Does ours?" she asked.

She had a good point.

"Does it say anything else?"

"It said only that their planned departure was delayed, but it did not say *why*. No signs of trouble showed up until the pilot noted that the ship had been invaded."

"Invaded?" It was an odd word choice. "Not boarded?"

"Invaded," she said.

"Is there anything to salvage?" Rolf asked from behind him.

"Comfort things," Dev said. "Chairs, food, dishes. But we're not going back there."

"Why not?" Phiry asked.

"Because," Dev said, "if someone is out there who's familiar with her, and we happen to run into that someone, we could suffer the same fate as her crew. So if she's still here when we come back, we'll salvage. Otherwise, we'll let the stuff go. It's not worth risking our lives over."

"Yet you will risk our lives over that woman?" Thenan asked.

"She is recognizable from that ship." Dev gave Thenan a sideways look. Thenan had leaned back in his chair, his circuitry pulsing silver.

"Someone tried to kill her," Rolf said. "I kinda like being alive."

"I agree," Phiry said. "I am not in this job to stick my neck out for stupid diplomats who are in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"You would've left her to die?"

Phiry gave him a withering look. "I would have fixed the life support and the engines."

"And lose our profit if we arrive late?"

"No one is going to threaten our trading position on Leen," she said.

"All right," Dev said, calling her bluff. "I'll leave you and the mystery woman on that scout. By the time we get back, you should have the systems fixed. That'll work for us."

Phiry pretended to consider the idea, but he could tell it was only to save face. "No," she said finally. "We already have her aboard."

She pushed off the panel and headed out of the command center. Thenan snorted, a mechanical sound. "Did you really expect her to stay on that ship alone?"

"She wouldn't have been alone," Dev said. "She'd have had our mystery woman with her."

"Of course not. You bargain with the people who run it." And then he added, just in case Rolf and Thenan missed the point, "You bargain with the people who have value."

THE MYSTERY WOMAN woke up shortly after they left the scout in their wake. Dev's quarters looked nothing like they usually did. Medical supplies were strewn all over the room, and ruined clothing on the floor. Willa leaned against his built-in liquor cabinet as if she were guarding it. With a quick gesture of his right hand, he dismissed her.

Dev wanted to talk with the woman in the bed alone. She was watching him under a cloud of dark hair.

"In case you wanted to know," Willa said as she passed, "she'll live. She needs rest and food and lots of water. She also needs to let the meds work their way through her system. I had to use a lot of stimulants to get her to wake up. Any more and she would be bouncing off the walls, which isn't good considering how many bruises and sprains she has, not to mention the broken ribs."

"Thanks for the medical report," Dev said. "Next time wait until I ask for it."

"Just because you're being so nice," Willa said, "I expect an extra share of the profits for playing nurse."

He grabbed the door and held it for her. She walked out, and he closed the door.

The mystery woman watched him from the bed. She had dark brown eyes that exactly matched her hair. Her lips were bloodless, her skin pallid. If she had any color at all, she would have been beautiful.

Dev walked over to her, feeling odd towering above her, and finally decided to sit at the foot of the bed.

She winced as his weight nudged her sideways, but said nothing.

"Did Willa tell you who we are?"

The woman nodded.

"I'm Dev. I'm the guy in charge here." He waited. The silence grew. Finally he said, "That's your cue to introduce yourself."

"Nicole." She spoke in a raspy soprano. "Nicole Delamark."

him from the bed. Her lips were bloodless, her skin pallid.

"Yes," Thenan said. "If we did this year, we would have returned to find Phiry and the mystery woman murdered, and the ship dead in space."

"Probably," Dev said.

"You would have risked Phiry for a woman you do not know?" Thenan asked.

Dev turned to him. "I know enough about that woman to know she was worth saving."

"How's that?" Rolf asked. "And don't give us that crap about the only people who get murdered are people with value."

"Magda told you that, did she?" Dev asked. "That wasn't what I said. I said people who are hated that much usually have some value. But you have to remember who I was talking to."

Rolf leaned his head against the doorjamb. "So now you're talking to us. What's the real reason?"

"The Concord," Dev said. "We save her, and we do them a favor. Some day, we'll need a favor in return."

"You do not bargain with something as big as the Concord," Thenan said.

She said the name with just enough hesitation that he wondered if it had more significance than he thought. But he had seen the passengers' names listed in the manifest, and Nicole Delamark was one of them. That much, at least, checked out. The rest of the manifest had been a problem. Phiry claimed it wasn't current; at least one of the passengers was unidentified.

"We know you're from the Concord and that you've been to Leen. That's a bit strange, isn't it? Leen, not Lison?"

He was easing her into her story. He didn't want her to feel too threatened. He wanted to get as much information out of her as possible.

"Lison's future," she said slowly, "is already established. There is an ongoing struggle to determine what nation will control Leen."

"The United Lison State will," Dev said.

"Several stellar nations have released satellites over Leen, and they plan to colonize. If they do, and the ULS does as well, things could get messy. That's something the Concord wants to prevent."

"So they sent you," he said. "Why?"

Her smile was small. It looked foreign on her pale face. "I must keep some secrets, Mr. . . .?"

"Dev," he said again.

"As, apparently, you must." She closed her eyes. "I'm very tired. And I hurt. I would like to sleep."

"In a moment," he said. Apparently there would be no easing her into telling her story. "First, tell me who attacked your scout."

Her eyelids moved slightly, but she didn't open her eyes. "I don't remember."

"Sure you do," he said. He took her hand and held it lightly in his own. It felt delicate and fragile. It was covered with bruises.

She was trembling.

"We're taking you to Leen with us," he said. "We don't have time to repair your scout."

Her eyes flew open. For a brief second, he saw panic in them. Then it faded. She eased her hand off his. "I'd rather go to Lison. The embassy there will get me home."

"Leen first," he said. "I picked you up against the advice of my

life. There's no reason to trust me after that."

"No, Mr. Dev," she said calmly. "There isn't."

He stared at her for a moment, unable to believe she had said that. But he should have expected it, if he'd paid attention to his own credo.

He got up and left the room.

HE SHOVED MAGDA out of his seat in the command center. She had taken off her boots again, and her bare feet were filthy from the dye. Thenan wasn't at his post—probably taking his first break in hours—but Rolf sat in the second's chair. Magda bumped him as Dev sat down.

"I was just going to send for you," Magda said. "We're getting company."

Dev cursed. That was all they needed. He looked at his flipscreen. They were being approached by a *Vendetta*-class marauder. Dev shifted uncomfortably in his seat. Kind used marauders to enforce his tax, but only as a vessel was leaving the system, not as it was entering.

Dev felt a chill. The pirates had been observing his ship from

crew. We satisfy ourselves before we take care of you."

"They can't know I'm on this ship."

"My crew?" he asked, deliberately misunderstanding. "I'm sorry, but they already do."

"No one else." She licked her lips, swallowed, then added, "Please."

The "please" wasn't a request. It was spoken in the voice of command. He shrugged. "Tell me what's happening, and I'll consider it."

"Pirates," she said, and the word came out so fast, he knew it was a lie. "They overpowered us, then killed my companions."

"And left you to die slowly. Why?"

"She plucked at the blanket with her other hand."

"What did they want from you? I didn't notice a large cargo hold in your ship. Were you carrying some sort of contraband?"

"Just money."

"Concord dollars?"

She nodded, a small movement.

"The pirates around here prefer rhodium and things they can trade anonymously. They don't put a lot of value on Concord dollars that can be traced. You'll have to try harder."

She closed her eyes. If anything, she looked even paler than she had when he first came in the room.

"I don't know why you're so worried about Leen," he said, "if it was pirates who came after you. I expect to be boarded at least once before we get to Leen. The pirates have more vessels in this area than anyone else."

"Mr. Dev," she said, opening her eyes, staring at him directly, as if she could persuade him with the power of her look. "I have no reason to trust you."

He stood, suddenly not wanting to be in this conversation any more. She could clamp her mouth shut. It didn't matter. He'd done more than he should have. If something happened to her, it wasn't his fault.

Still, he couldn't resist getting the last word. "Can't trust me? Of course not. Why would you want to? All I did was save your

Maybe Nicole hadn't been lying to him. Maybe the scout had been accosted by pirates.

"We can outrun them," Rolf said.

"Maybe," Dev said.

"We have the faster ship."

"They have the network. If one marauder is here, others are lurking close by."

"Let me try."

Dev swiveled his chair. "Where would you run to, Rolf? We have a delivery to make on Leen."

"If they let us get there," Rolf said.

"Kind hasn't interfered with us before," Dev said.

"He hasn't done *this* before," Magda muttered.

Rolf moved a hand along his control board. "Message for you, Dev. It's Kind."

He almost said he'd take it in his quarters. But he didn't want Nicole to see it. So he had to take it here. "All right," he said. "Let's hear it."

The pirate's face filled Dev's flipscreen. Kind's widow's peak seemed more pronounced, and he had more lines around his eyes than he'd had the last time Dev had seen him. Kind looked thinner and sadder somehow.

"You entered the Oberon system at a different point than you usually do."

Dev felt a chill. The pirates had been observing his ship from the moment he left drivespace. "Thomas," he said, "you know my habits. I always arrive at the outskirts of the system. It gives me time to get my bearings."

"Or to salvage."

Magda shifted slightly. Rolf didn't move. In fact, he was too still. Dev smiled. "I don't need to salvage."

"That's what I thought." Kind leaned toward his communications unit. "I told my people that you were one of the rich ones, that I hadn't even expected you to come back to Oberon."

"Greed," Dev said. "Greed and the desire for one more run."

Which, all in all, was turning out to be a mistake.

"You stopped at a derelict scout."

"Yes," Dev said. "But we didn't salvage it."

"Good." Kind folded his hands together. "Because that ship should be left alone."

"Plague ship?" Dev asked, knowing full well it was not.

"Let's just say anything you took off there should be sent through your airlock now."

"Anything?" Dev asked.

"Or anyone," Kind said.

"Is that a threat, Thomas?" Dev asked.

"Threat?" Kind chuckled. The sound was cold. "Only the weak threaten, Dev. I was just being friendly, and making certain that someone I respect doesn't get into trouble."

"I appreciate that," Dev said.

"I thought you might." And with that, Kind signed off. His ship circled around theirs and then disappeared.

"You know he's not gone," Magda said. "They're watching us."

"Of course they are," Dev stood. He felt irritated. This was messier than he wanted it to be. The pirates should have had no

commission to run for Concord Assembly. Last, but was tapped for diplomatic service. Served with distinction in...

He began to scan, looking for something that might help him, something that might tie her to Kind. He found nothing in the written text, so he punched in a request for holophotos.

What he saw made him double-check his request, and then the caption. He had made the correct request, gotten the right file. But the Nicole Delamark in the holophoto was clearly a Marine. Her arms were wider than his, and covered with muscle, as was the rest of her. Her blue eyes seemed to look straight into his. He stared at them, and her coffee-colored skin, and her red hair.

Any one of those things could have changed, but not all of them. And not the body. The woman in his bed was in good physical condition, but she didn't have the muscles—or even the remnants of the muscles—of the woman in the holophoto.

He looked at other photos to convince himself. But they all confirmed what he noted in the first one.

The injured woman in his bed was not who she claimed to be.

He stood, and was about to wake her, but Magda's voice interrupted him.

"Better get in here, Dev," she said. "I really don't want to die alone."

BY THE TIME he made it to command central, the klaxons were sounding, warning of approaching ships. The sound was loud enough to wake the dead, so he would bet the mystery woman was up, wondering what the hell was happening.

What was happening wasn't pretty: The *Lady* was surrounded by marauders, half a dozen of them. Two would have proven difficult to fight. Six were impossible.

"The marauders have trained plasma cannons on us," Thennan said. He didn't sound frightened, but then he never did. Rolf was in the command chair; he moved aside so that Dev could sit, but didn't move his hands away from the mass cannon controls.

Dev shoved him away. "We'll need more than that to take down one marauder, let alone six."

Magda was biting her lower lip. "I sure as hell wish you'd listen to me sometimes."

So far, the marauders hadn't shot at him, and he didn't know why. They wanted the woman, and that confused him too. If they wanted her, why hadn't they taken her off the scout?

He would have posed that question to Kind, but Kind's marauder was gone. His minions were going to do his dirty work. Dev had already received his warning. Apparently Kind was giving him just enough time to change his mind.

Then he felt something cold at the base of his neck.

"I suggest you don't move," the mystery woman said.

Magda cursed and started to stand. Out of the corner of his eye, Dev saw the barrel of his own mass pistol pointing at her. Careless of him to forget the weapons in his locker. He would wager his entire cargo that another mass pistol was pointed at the back of his head.

"I don't think now's the time to say thank you," Dev said.

"I agree." The mystery woman leaned over his other shoulder, peering at the controls before him. "You're going to outrun them."

"No," Dev said. "I'm going to die if I even attempt that. And believe me, lady, I'm not fond of dying."

the moment he left drivespace.

objection to diplomats. They had an unspoken truce—knowledge, on both sides, that to mess with each other would create incidents that neither of them wanted.

What had made Kind violate that truce? And what had made him slaughter a group of Concord diplomats? That wasn't his way at all. Kind did a lot of illegal things, but he never did anything stupid.

"So what do we do now?" Rolf asked. "Throw her out the airlock like he suggested?"

Dev glared at him. In all the years Dev had been trading, he had never taken a life, not after his disastrous first run. It was a fact he was proud of, one he didn't plan to change. "Let me worry about it."

"It's my life you're worrying about," Rolf said. "I don't want to be here when Kind finds out that we have that woman on this ship."

"For all he can tell, she's a crew member," Dev said.

"Unless he knows her," Rolf said.

Dev stood. "Get us to Leen, Magda. And call me if there's trouble."

"Expect to hear from me soon," She bent over her console. "I have a hunch this trip won't be easy."

He agreed. It hadn't been easy since they arrived. Why should the next few hours be any different?

HIS QUARTERS FELT alien to him. The mystery woman slept in his bed, her face pinched with pain, her hands twitching as if she were having a bad dream.

He didn't wake her up. Instead he used the console he'd built into his space to access the database in the Oberon system grid. He took the system off voice-recognition, and used the console to punch in his request:

Biographical data on Nicole Delamark, suspected Concord diplomat.

The information appeared in seconds:

Nicole Delamark: b. 2466, Earth metropolis, Union of Sol. Served sixteen years Concord Marines. Attained rank of Major. Resigned

"Neither am I," she said. "But it's better than the alternative." Suddenly he understood. For her, it was better to die in a space battle than to be turned over to Kind—who, apparently, was the one who had tortured her and left her for dead.

Death may have been better for her, but it wasn't better for Dev. And as much as he'd put on the line for this woman, he really didn't appreciate her holding a pistol to his neck.

He shoved one elbow up and into her broken ribs. She screamed and fell backward. Magda sprang from her chair, tackled the woman, and held both her arms down. Rolf hurried over to help. Together, they held her until Dev removed the guns from her hands.

The woman was white with pain, her pupils small pinpoints. "Please," she said to him. "Please don't turn me over to them."
"I've done you enough favors," he said.

BUT IT SEEMED that he hadn't. After he'd shackled her to a stanchion in the crew quarters, he had that feeling again. Compassion. It would kill him yet.

He squashed the feeling. He had already contacted the marauders. They were waiting for Kind to return. Seemed Kind wanted to deal with this woman himself. She had done something to him, something unforgivable.

While he waited, Dev went back to his quarters and cleaned up. He gave the medical supplies to Willa and replaced the

"Please," she said. "Please don't turn me over to them."

sheets on his bed. Then he sat on the edge of it, on the blanket, and tried to calm himself.

Kind would just torture her again, and this time Dev would be a party to it. He didn't want to do her any favors, but he didn't want her ghost haunting him either.

He sighed. He saw only one choice. Another good deed. This time, he hoped the punishment wouldn't be too severe.

DEV DELIVERED HER himself. Kind and five men met him at the airlock. The men were large and muscular, and they carried weapons to match. Dev himself carried nothing. The woman was proving slippery even with her injuries, and he didn't want to risk having her wriggle out of her restraints and grab his weapon.

Kind looked at her, his expression flat and cold. But his eyes were alive. Dev watched them, mesmerized. They were filled with lust and hatred, and something that seemed suspiciously like regret.

The woman raised her chin in defiance. She had no pain meds in her system anymore, but she somehow managed to stay upright.

"Carla," Kind said in a mocking tone.

A shiver ran through Dev. Carla? Only one "Carla" fit this woman's description—Carla Devane, the assassin.

"Still sleeping alone, Thomas?" she asked.

Color flooded Kind's cheeks. "The condition of my bed is none of your business."

Dev had never seen Kind flustered. Neither, apparently, had his men. They were trying not to seem fascinated, their legs apart, their hands at their sides, ready for any emergency. But their gaze kept straying to Kind.

"It used to be my business," Carla said.

Kind reached out a hand and grabbed her neck, pulling her forward. She didn't move, but her breath hitched, and that seemed to be enough for him.

He let her go, seemed to remember that Dev was there, and turned to him.

"Thanks, Devlin," he said. Dev started. No one used his full name. No one had since he started trading. "You can go about your business. We'll forget the tax this time."

Dev flicked his lower lip. This was his cue. He should leave, and he knew it. But he had to speak up, for his sake more than for hers.

"I don't know what she did to you," Dev said. "But—"

"She tried to kill me, Dev," Kind said. "After I'd shown her my hospitality and made her one of my own."

He'd slept with her, then, just as their banter indicated. Obviously, Kind had fallen for her.

She'd just been doing her job.

"She failed, obviously," Kind said, "then lied to the diplomats about who she was. They offered her free passage. Once they left Leon, someone figured out who she was. She hates to be discovered. Makes her mad. Fortunately, Carla's a great pilot. She killed them, by the way, not me. I don't do that sort of thing."

"No," she said. "You prefer to break your victims—"

"If that were true," Kind said, "your mouth wouldn't be so smart."

So Kind had caught up with her, disabled the scout, and put the rings on her wrists, leaving her to die. Dev had thwarted that.

Dev swallowed. "I was going to ask one thing."

Kind looked bemused. "Did she touch you already, Dev? Be warned, she has no heart."

"No," Dev said. "She was in no condition to get near me." A lie, of course. She had gotten near him, but not in the way Kind thought.

"What, then?" Kind asked.

"I..." Dev stopped himself. He was going to ask for clemency, for leniency. He was going to reveal himself as something of a humanitarian to one of the most ruthless pirates in the Venge.

Kind raised his eyebrows, obviously waiting.

Dev took a deep breath. "I delivered her to you as you asked, because I wanted to prove that I was cooperating." He was shaking. He clenched his fists to hide it. "But you've already gotten your shot at her. Now I'd like mine. I'd like to kill her myself."

Kind's face eased into a smile. He pulled his mass pistol from its holster and handed it to Dev. "Be my guest."

Such a sign of trust. Dev could easily turn the pistol on Kind. And then what? Get shot by the five bodyguards already on the scene? Or if he were lucky enough to escape this place, get chased through the Oberon system by six marauders? Try to get into drivespace before any of them caught him?

He pointed the pistol at Carla. Her smile was cruel, but her eyes were filled with tears. She knew what he was doing. He was doing her a favor. One she didn't deserve.

"Hasn't anyone ever told you," she asked, "that you shouldn't point a weapon at someone unless you intend to use it?"

"Oh, yes. They told me." Dev pulled the trigger. The energy burst hit her, made her shudder violently, and then she collapsed. She was dead before she hit the floor.

He handed the pistol back to Kind, who looked both shocked and surprised. "Someone should have told her," Dev said, "not to challenge a man with a gun."

Kind attached the pistol to his hip. His face was drained of color, and he looked older than he had moments before. "You surprise me, Devlin. I'd heard you'd never personally killed anyone."

Dev made himself smile. "Funny," he said. "I'd heard the same thing about you."

THEY DELIVERED THEIR CARGO to Leen and left with payment in rhodium. Kind remained true to his word. The *Wayward Lady* left the Oberon system with profit plus the twenty percent Dev had planned to use to pay the Kind tax.

On the journey back, he switched quarters with Magda, but the move to the smaller space didn't help. He found himself doing everything he could to avoid sleep. Carla was not a ghost he would have chosen for himself. But, it seemed, even in death she wouldn't leave him alone.

At least she was a kinder ghost than his long-dead crewmates. At least she understood why she had died.

Killing her had brought him full circle. Death at the beginning of his career, death at the end. And this was the end. It was time to retire to someplace warm where he didn't have to think about pirates and assassins and malfunctioning star drives. Someplace where he wouldn't be tempted into another good deed. The credo had never been for his crew. It had always been for him. And he had never paid attention to it, even when he should have. ☹



about the author

Kristine Kathryn Rusch has written nine Star Trek novels and a novel in each of the Predator, Aliens, and Quantum Leap worlds—all in collaboration with her husband Dean Wesley Smith. She also has written Batman short stories and one other STAR-DRIVE story in addition to "No Good Deed."

Rusch's year began with a succession of professional accomplishments, including the selection of her short story "Details" as the first-place winner in the Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine Reader's Choice Awards for 1998, and the acceptance of three short stories by as many major magazines.



about the illustrator

He post graduated from Northern Illinois University in 1994 with a BFA degree, and turned to working in the hobby game industry right away.

He joined the TSR staff illustration team in the fall of 1996, spearheading the conceptual feel of the ALTERNITY™ game's STAR-DRIVE setting. He now lives in Washington with his wife and three sons and continues in his art career with Wizards of the Coast.

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Silver Screen

by George Zebrowski

You Can't See the Same Film Twice

I saw *Planet of the Apes* in its year of release (1968), when I was in college. I was not urgently political then, but I simmered some. The reversal of apes and men and Rod Serling's trick ending did not overwhelm me, although I saw that the film was well made, well directed, and exceptionally well acted. I failed to see that Charlton Heston, the great American movie hero who never lost a fight, now went on his knees before the ruins of the Statue of Liberty, in the same year that Mayor Richard Daley's police beat demonstrators in the streets of Chicago during the Democratic convention. I shook my head at the commerce that followed the first film and its sequels into the early seventies in the form of merchandising and novelizations. I was saddened when a publisher went to the hospital bed of a writer I knew to demand a novelization that was late. I lamented with other writers that Hollywood had not chosen to make a film out of another novel on this

theme, L. Sprague De Camp and P. Schuyler Miller's *Gorms Homs* (1950). I did not see what producer Arthur P. Jacobs had managed to give audiences, in what were thought by the studio and distributors to be family entertainments.

Now that these five films have been rereleased on laser disc and tape, and to the American Movie Classics channel (AMC on cable and satellite dish) with a documentary about both the technical and cultural contexts in which these movies were made, I had a chance to look again. At once I saw that the earlier laser disc releases of the early nineties had been technically deficient, and had left out the last film. This new gathering of the five films, which presumably will go on to release in the new DVD format, contains freshly struck widescreen prints, with superior color balance and sound. One should keep in mind that these films form a miniseries that tells a rounded story. Some of it doesn't fit perfectly, but the gaps don't seem to matter much in the viewing.

A number of insights and issues stood out for me as I watched these new prints. The more subtle reversals of the first film hide behind the obvious and entertaining reversal of human and ape social positions, and are foreshadowed by the misanthropy of George Taylor (Charlton Heston) and his escape from a humanity that has disappointed him. But in the ape Dr. Zaius (Maurice Evans), Taylor finds someone who is as distrustful of human beings as he has been—and Dr. Zaius puts Taylor in the position of defending humankind.

Dr. Zaius, we learn, is also in the business of controlling the growth of scientific knowledge, and knows all about human beings and that they destroyed themselves. He knows that Taylor has not come from another world, but perhaps from a place where there is a threatening resurgence of humanity brewing.

What is hidden from him, and from Taylor, is that Taylor has come out of the past. Dr. Zaius doesn't want humankind to contaminate apekind. He sees and fears the family resemblance. And Taylor's worst fears about his own kind are confirmed before the ruins of the Statue of Liberty.

Ironically, Taylor and Zaius are kindred critics. The ape religious scrolls, when we hear them read, sound much like Taylor's misanthropy at the beginning of the movie, when he speculates on the centuries that have passed on Earth while his exploratory ship is in transit, and when he later argues with his fellow astronauts about the worth of humanity. Behind the film's final scene before the Statue of Liberty, echoing Taylor and Zaius's unspoken agreement about the failures of humanity, is a summation of our fears in 1968 about the future of liberty and the very survival of humanity.

Beneath the Planet of the Apes (1970), released in the year after we reached the Moon, is even more radical: The mutated remnants of a surviving humanity, faced with Dr. Zaius and a military contingent who have come to their stronghold because they feared the presence of

▲ HEY, NOVA, I CAN SEE YOUR HUT FROM HERE!

Charlton Heston and friend search for a planet far from the stinking puzes of any damned dirty apes.

advanced human beings like Taylor and Brent (James Franciscus), set in motion a doomsday bomb that destroys the Earth. Taylor is spared this last humiliation; he dies from gunfire a few moments before the end. One imagines Zaius in his last moments, regretting that he searched out this last of humanity.

Having completed the despairing criticism of humankind begun in the first film, it suddenly seems that this story has nowhere left to go.

Except backward in time.

The third film in the series, *Escape from the Planet of the Apes* (1971), begins with good humor and comedy but again veers into tragedy, as Cornelius (Roddy McDowall), Dr. Zira (Kim Hunter), and a third ape (played by Sal Mineo in a brief supporting appearance), return to twentieth-century Los Angeles. The difficulties of repairing and relaunching Taylor's spaceship (or is it Brent's?) are glossed over. This arrival out of the future happens as the events of the second film lead to Earth's destruction by the doomsday bomb in the ruined New York City of the mutants; but the three apes lift off in time to see the Earth engulfed in fire, we learn.

The time-traveling apes are at first welcomed in Los Angeles and become popular media celebrities; but as information comes out about who they are, that they experimented on human beings, and that apes will come to dominate a future Earth, the ape trio is reduced to two by the accidental death of the character played by Sal Mineo. Cornelius and Dr. Zira flee so that Zira's child can be born in safety.

Seeking to prevent a future dominated by apes, a scientist

(played by Eric Braeden) agitates to have Dr. Zira's child aborted; when she and Cornelius escape, he is not averse to having them tracked down and killed, and finally takes a personal part in committing the murders.

But we cheer for the ape child to be born. We are brought to see ourselves as debased at best and genocidal at worst, as the ape parents are hunted down and shot.



Dr. Zaius doesn't want humankind to contaminate apekind. He sees and fears the family resemblance.

The third film fulfills the radical progression of events and reversals of the first two, indicting humanity and compelling the audience to take sides with the enemy! The viewer is also well aware that George Taylor may be alive in this past—and this might have been a chance to bring Heston back for a cameo; but this would also have led to the possibility of preventing his voyage by killing him. As it stands, the third film cleverly prepares the way for the fourth and fifth films with a story that is both good-humored and even inspiring, despite the fact that it ends in so much classical tragedy.

The fourth film, *Conquest*

of the *Planet of the Apes* (1972), proceeds in the shadow of the coming reversal of human and ape societies, and pushes the envelope of radical politics and screen violence, again enlisting our sympathies against human behavior.

Caesar, the talking ape child of Cornelius and Dr. Zira, has survived in the care of a circus owner (played by Ricardo Montalban). Caesar

In the fifth and final film, *Battle for the Planet of the Apes* (1973), humanity has destroyed itself with nuclear war, but survivors coexist uneasily with strong ape communities. This is the juncture at which apes will go on to dominate and humanity will decline into the speechless herds whose numbers are kept down by hunting, as in the first film; or else they will learn to coexist in productive ways with the intelligent apes. After a military confrontation with the survivors of Los Angeles, including some of the people introduced in the fourth film, the issue is decided for coexistence, and a flash forward by the film's narrator (John Huston) tells us that the time of Earth's destruction is long past, and that the expected end has not occurred—at least not in this time line.

This hopeful development introduces the level of print science fiction's sophistication to the ideas of the series. The conception, which has been seriously discussed by scientists in recent years, also has the virtue of removing all so-called time paradoxes, present in the closed loop of time travel along a single line that would otherwise reduce historical causality to absurdity, by saying that the grim events of this story-sequence happened in one probability but not in the one that is given to us in the last film's finale. Deliberate choices create new time lines, it is suggested.

A fair assessment of these films must face the question of how good they are as films. Certainly the ideas are of importance for their ingenuity in bringing SF conceptions to a wider audience; the social satire is quite commendable; but both these considerations will override

Silver Screen

the quality of photography, acting, scripting, direction, and production in the highly interested viewer who is so startled by the SF ideas that he or she may be willing to overlook other drawbacks.



When John Glenn went into orbit aboard the space shuttle last year, a West Coast joke told us to "Put on ape costumes when Glenn lands—pass it on!"

As a motion picture, the first film is clearly the best on all counts. The second, third, and fourth are not as good; and the finale is weak. Yet all are well made and can be seen repeatedly. Haste, born of the first film's success, is what makes the sequels sometimes rougher yet skilled assemblies of what they might have been. For many viewers, and even some sophisticated ones, these defects have not been fatal. When seen in pristine, freshly struck prints, in widescreen, on a television, the films look handsome and intriguing even to a casual eye.

There is a human tendency that finds fascinating the sight of kindred human physiology in apes, in apes speaking as humans and behaving in ways that seem to resemble us but with dramatic differences. This kind of success in films is not new. It goes back to *Kong* (1933) and *Mighty Joe Young* (1949). The second of these films shows how much we wanted to renovate Kong into a friend rather than an enemy and a tragic oddity. The *Planet of the Apes* films built on the success of previous interest in our cousins, one which seems to be basic. At its worst, this interest produces anthropomorphic images of animals engaged in terminal cuteness; at its best we have

Aesop's *Fables* and George Orwell's *Animal Farm*.

Looking closely at the *Apes* films, we see the writers and filmmakers backing away from the harshest judgments of the first three movies, until hope takes over completely in the last one, enabling the vari-

ous ambivalences to again wear their masks of entertainment and adventure. As entertainment and merchandising (the *Apes* films produced the first such franchising success of modern times), these films have permented the culture to the point of becoming a basis for topical humor. When John Glenn went into orbit aboard the space shuttle last year, a West Coast joke told us to "Put on ape costumes when Glenn lands—pass it on!"—while an East Coast joke complained that "There won't be enough time to bury the Statue of Liberty before Glenn gets back." I marveled that films carrying so much serious freight had been reduced to this kind of reference. I also worried about entertainment and self-censorship as I rewatched the five films, noticing how Caesar's speech in the fourth film had backed off from its logical conclusion of revenge. His hesitation seemed wrong, but it served the needs of entertainment. In fact, the speech had been revised in post-production, because it was feared that the film had overstepped the bounds of a family film in its violence and politics.

Do these films ultimately pull their punches? Well, we may yet have peace in Ireland

and Israel. South Africa has moved back from the abyss, at least so far. Some things seem better than before, so who knows?

When we look at the best books, plays, films, and poems, we find that they are trying to tell us things we

don't want to see or hear, but in a way that will get us to see, in a way that will get certain points past our reluctance to hear truth-telling. The money people, riding on the backs of talent and brains, sometimes don't know this. In the AMC documentary about the making of the *Apes* films, the on-camera studio people minimized the social satire and serious content of the films, while the actors, writers, and producers were clearly aware of the thoughtful elements. One director admitted that the city riots of the fourth film were modeled on the Los Angeles race riots.

When I heard the two *Apes* jokes, I laughed with everyone else; but I also felt uneasy and worried about cultural amnesia. The books, plays, and movies that engaged us with

truth-telling in their artfulness may also be forgotten, and we will have to wait for new works to help us see afresh.

With the release of the five *Apes* movies, we see that something has stuck and refuses to go away, and it wasn't only the entertainment value. The *Planet of the Apes* films told us that we had a racist heritage to overcome, that as a species we were violent and capable of destroying the planet, and that we might be able to progress beyond these liabilities.

Maybe.

And maybe we are just not a breakout species. ☹



about the author

George Zebrowski, better known for his novels and stories, has been writing about SF films since the early 1970s, when his first essay, "Science Fiction in the Visual Medium," was praised by *Crawdad* magazine as "Perhaps the most provocative and interesting essay ever written on the SF film."

This was followed by a major introduction to a new edition of the H. G. Wells 1936 film *Things to Come*. He has since written about SF films for *The New Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, *The Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, *Cinefantastique*, *Quester*, and *Omni Online*.

■ *Planet of the Apes*, 112 minutes. Screenplay by Ned Sherrin and Michael Wilson, from the novel by Pierre Boulle. Directed by Franklin Schaffner.

■ *Reconquest of the Planet of the Apes*, 100 minutes. Screenplay by Hart Hancock and Paul Dehn. Directed by Ted Post.

■ *Escape from the Planet of the Apes*, 88 minutes. Screenplay by Paul Dehn. Directed by Don Taylor.

■ *Conquest of the Planet of the Apes*, 88 minutes. Screenplay by Paul Dehn. Directed by J. Lee Thompson.

■ *Battle for the Planet of the Apes*, 86 minutes. Screenplay by John William Corrington and Joyce Hooper Corrington. Directed by J. Lee Thompson.



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ASOR88

A column designed to acquaint the ordinary person with science
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ASK DR. SCIENCE...

July 1954 C. P. of East
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explain Infinity?

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person like yourself thinks
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Hey, Infinity is a piece of cake.
This is where our knowledge
of Infinity comes from.
Infinity comes from cake.

Infinity was discovered by
young Erhard Wurst in 1747.
Every Saturday, Erhard's
mother made a German
chocolate cake (what else?).
The rule was: Eat all you
want, but don't take the last
piece. But one Saturday
Erhard did—just as his
mother walked into the
kitchen. Which is why Erhard
discovered Infinity, or, as we
know it now, Wurst's First
Law of Cake.

"Erhard," his mother
cried out, "you half eaten
the whole cake!"

"No, Mama," Erhard
answered, thinking fast on
his feet, "I have not, for this
is ein INFINITE cake—
even if there are only
two crumbs left, there
will always be a third
crumb in between!"

"What it is, is ein
schokoladen cake,"
Mama said, "and you
are a litte schmartenge-
heimer kid who is going
to bed without any
supper!"

Wurst's Law was the
only one Erhard ever did.
When he was sixteen, he ran
away to North Carolina to
raise pigs.

September 1976 R. M.
from Bulfinch, Australia,
would like an answer to this
question:

Dr. Science, what can you tell
me about "fixed stars"?

Dear R. M.: I wish I didn't
even have to talk about this,
but let's face it—there are
fixed stars. Not many, but
some. And it's a shame, too,
because those guys make
plenty of money—a hell
of a lot more than I
do, and all they

have to do is run up and down
the court in their shorts. If Dr.
Science did that in front of a
lot of people, they'd lock him
up somewhere.

July 1997 B. R. of Changzhi,
China, asks the question:

Dr. Science, I am interested
in cosmology, and I would
like to know more about gas
dynamics.

Dear B. R.: Early ideas about
cosmology were based on
classical physics, including
concepts such as gas dynam-
ics. Now, you can't even talk
about the Big Bang without
bringing in quantum physics.
For instance: You want to look
at matter? Fine. Only—if
you're not looking at it, the
properties of matter are only
probabilities. How hard is
iron? How hot is a light? Hey,
you're not looking at it, you
don't know. It isn't even there!

Still, if you'd like to learn
more about gas dynamics, Dr.
Science knows a way around
this crazy quantum stuff. Get
in a crowded elevator, ride up
sixty-two floors. By the time
you get there, you'll know
more about gas dynamics than
you ever wanted to.

April 1985 T. W. of
Opelousas, Louisiana, would
like an answer to this question:
Dr. Science, I would like
to know a lot more about
parallel universes.

Dear T. W.: Hey, who
wouldn't? Seriously,
though, a lot of
physicists believe
there are an infi-
nite number of
other universes
out there, or
maybe more
than that. There
could even be
other Earths,
worlds where
there are other
"yous" and other
"mes." They'd be
different from



us, because everyone who ever lived would have made trillions of different decisions along the way.

I sincerely hope that on one of those parallel worlds I got into business instead of Science. I'm the head guy at Exxon-Mobil or something, and I've got a chair you can lean back in, and an office with a window instead of some stinking lab in the basement. I also hope my brother is working in a sewage plant in New Jersey, instead of making three hundred thou a year fixing some little kid's teeth. There's a lot of stuff I hope, but I haven't got time to go into it here.

December 1991 R. O. of Hokitika, New Zealand, asks: Dr. Science: Can you tell me something about Circadian Rhythm?
Dear R. O.: I don't even know where Circadia is, and I'm not into music. Try *Rolling Stone*.

July 1936 R. C. T. of Willard, Ohio, would like you to respond to this question: Dr. Science, what is the First Law of Motion?
Dear R. C. T.: The First Law of Motion states that anything in the Universe that is left by itself and nobody messes with it, it'll sit there forever. If it's moving, it'll keep on moving. You can test this out at home. Dad's on the couch, he's taking a nap. Nothing's going to get the guy up. That's a body at rest. Your brother's got a new car. That's a body in motion. He's never going to stop.

Another part of the Law says you're looking at something, you can't tell whether it's coming or going—that's Uncle Walt.

September 1938 G. S. of Erzurum, Turkey asks: Dr. Science: What exactly is a "chronon"?

Dear G. S.: A chronon is the billionth part of the billionth part of the billionth part of the billionth part of a second. Your watch stopped, or what? Don't ever write to me again.

January 1955 L. E. of Cement, Oklahoma, wants to know:

Dr. Science, who invented numbers?
Dear L. E.: No one invented numbers. Numbers were already there. For a long time, though, no one could see many numbers. There are still people today who can only count up to three. After that, they simply say, "a whole lot." Some of these people live in primitive locations on Earth. Some of them work in malls. The Egyptians used symbols like hawks and bulls to count. The Romans did stuff like MDCXII. One of the biggest numbers you can find is ALEPH 2, which is the number of all geometric curves. ALEPH 3 is the number Dr. Science owes on all his credit cards.

May 1976 Z. V. V. of Brainerd, Minnesota, asks: Dr. Science, as I understand the law of probabilities, if the referee tosses a one-cent piece in the air, it will come up heads half the time, and half the time tails. Am I correct?
Dear Z. V. V.: No, you certainly are not. Toss it up a million times, say, and you're likely to get heads about 495,000 times instead of half a million. Why? Because the heads side, with Mr. Lincoln's picture on it, weighs a little

more than tails, so it will be on the bottom more often.

Incidentally, what do you care? What are the odds of anyone with the initials Z. V. V. ever playing football?

February 1928 T. L. of Ljubuknsky, Russia, would like an answer to this question: Dr. Science, why do I have bad breath?

No need to be alarmed, T. L. Bad breath is common, and perfectly normal. Sometimes, bad breath is caused by chemical odors from the food we eat. Garlic, salami, onions—or all three together—can cause our breath to emit foul smells. Another cause is known as "mouth rot." You see, T. L., there are about a hundred million bacteria in our mouths at any one time—tiny, disgusting little micro-organisms writhing around and gobbling up bits of that salami, reproducing themselves, defecating, and dying, and these processes can—

Excuse me, T. L., Dr. Science will be right back. . .

August 1947 F. R. of Alkmaar, Netherlands, asks: Dr. Science, Daddy says we don't have room for a dog, but I could have something smaller. What do you suggest?

Dear F. R.: I don't have a lot of room here in the lab, so I quite understand your problem. I think you ought to get a cockroach. The American cockroach, *Periplaneta americana*, is my favorite, but there are around four thousand species out there, so I'll bet you can find one nearby.

Many are black or brown, oval-shaped and flat, and smell really bad. Some species have interesting

mating rites: nibbling on one another, waving their abdomens about, making strange noises. Class, can we think of any other species that does that?

Say, if you're lucky, F. R., your new little pet will have puppies. Cockroaches lay up to thirty-two eggs at a time. You could raise a whole brood in your own home. Name your pet Squishy, Crunchy, or Yuck. These are all good names.

Now, go tell Daddy what you've learned. He's got to be proud, having a kid like you.

March 1924 R. P. of Winterthur, Switzerland, wants to know: Dr. Science, what are some of the effects of being weightless in space?

Dear R. P.: Fatigue, nausea, disorientation, headaches, motion sickness, to name a few. You lose your appetite. Your heart beats faster, and fluids clog up your nose. If you get back home about four this morning, like Dr. Science did, you can experience all these symptoms without even getting out of bed.

All questions appearing in ASK DR. SCIENCE have been adapted from questions sent in by readers to AMAZING Stories over the years, or have been sent to Dr. Science by troll collectors and other mean-spirited persons.

We welcome your questions for this column. But please do not address your questions to Dr. Science himself. Dr. Science knows better than to open his own mail. Address your questions to Neil Barrett, Jr., Dr. Science's friend, at AMAZING Stories, P.O. Box 707, Renton, WA 98057-0707. Mr. Barrett will use it to that your questions are slipped under Dr. Science's door.

*The ghost of a course not pursued, the notes of a song not silenced—
these things may fade, but they never disappear.*

π night at the opera

B HIROSHIMA sips hot green tea from a plastic go-cup and waits in Boston Harbor,
Y his hovercraft rocking like a big steel cradle beside the Thompson Island Prison dock.
Nearly forty minutes now. She should be coming out soon.

C The August day is hot and the dirty water smells, but it's no worse than the little
H Kyushu cove back home when the wind is still. When he was younger, he might've
A spent the time listening to music—but that's a dangerous option these days; a disap-
R proving twinge in the back of his brain tells him so. The wrong music can raise the
L wrong thoughts, and then things begin to unravel.

E It's not so bad, Hiroshima tells himself. A little discomfort now is nothing in the
N long term. The job, a corporate indenture to Boston-based Humboldt Biologicals, is
E honorable, with room for advancement. And his mentor, R&D Assistant Director
Matthew Churry, assures him it will get easier with time.

Along the dock ahead, the regular MBTA ferry kicks up its growling engines as two
men in dark blue Transit uniforms lock the boarding ramp into place along the rail.
The ferry pulls away from the dock, kicking back a choppy wake that sends the hover-
car wallowing. Scalding tea sloshes over the back of Hiroshima's hand.

"*Kuso!*" he blurts as the car grates against the dock. Despite the conditioning, words from
his past still surface from time to time. He wipes his hand on his pants and looks to see
if she is coming yet.

The tall prison buildings above the dock have narrow window holes slanted to
gather sunlight in winter and deflect it in summer. They remind him of the *hekatun*-
built towers where he was born: another small hole in his programming, perhaps. The
memories are as welcome now as illegal music, but still they come.

B When he was a boy, he was just "Hiro," and it seemed that Tokyo was the center of
R the world. But that was before the Great Quake, before the near coasts of Hokkaido
U and Honshu disappeared, swallowed in huge bites that left the gleaming business tower-
S ers in crumpled ruins. He remembers the noise and the fires, the screaming faces lit by
S flames as broken gas mains ignited under the sparking touch of snapped power lines.
Bodies crushed to bloody mash, flesh burned black and crisp: food for stray dogs, and
then, all too soon, for the hungry stray people who wandered the ruins like lost *odako*,
like ghosts. All this, Hiroshima remembers in spite of himself.

O Somehow his father found him. The old man took him away to live in a quiet

ILLUSTRATION BY J. J. ABBOTT



Kyushu town, far from the fallen glass and steel. He remembers his father's fishing boat, and nets that brought in barely enough to keep a roof over their heads. He remembers the tiny garden plot behind the house, and the *bonsai* his father tended. In the evenings they would listen to music, *gayin* opera and classic Japanese court music, and talk of the day when Hiro would compose such things himself.

A flash of red draws his eye to the asphalt walk that runs down from the prison, and he straightens in his seat. Rich, red hair: She is finally here.

Today she wears a narrow black suit and carries a professional's work case. Her brilliant hair swings around her shoulders, shining. She moves as if she doesn't have a care in the world; as if, even in the tight skirt and jacket, she doesn't feel the heat. Her name is Colleen Brennan, and she is a musician, a local singer-songwriter rapidly gaining a following.

She is also the enemy.

Four days ago Churry met with her to dissuade her from her musical attacks on Humboldt. She has led a ragtag campaign condemning one of the company's most popular food supplements—a "dole-drog," Colleen Brennan calls it, because the government pays Humboldt to add the depressant to the blue-stamp foods set aside for the poor.

The day after that meeting she sang a new song and incited a riot on Boston Common, sending thousands of people against Humboldt's offices downtown. Oh, the shameful publicity, the unjust calls for punishment of the guards, who had only fired their weapons to protect company property! Colleen Brennan was arrested that night, but now she is free again, briefly.

Hiroshima shakes his head, marveling at the self-assurance in her stride. She smiles at the sun as if she's greeting a long-lost friend. He wonders how she can believe that her supporters paid her bail. As if uneducated malcontents could ever raise so much money. He delivered the anonymous sum himself, nearly an

hour ago, the amount was mere petty cash to Churry-san.

Yesterday a reporter bribed a guard to speak with her, and Colleen Brennan's words swept the news. Every broadcast opens with her face, her voice, her music. Humboldt stock has fallen drastically in the past twenty-four hours, forcing Churry-san to issue today's order: the only intelligent option remaining.

Hiroshima watches this proud woman, his enemy, approach the dock, and he smiles at the perfection of the moment. In his head he composes a poem for her—*In which is there more beauty: in the span of a life fully lived, or in the last heartbeat and the final breath?*

Colleen Brennan slows and stops beside his car, leans down and places her hand on his door. Her gleaming hair falls forward over her shoulders, bright against faintly freckled cheeks. Her hand is small and pale, with sturdy, blunt fingers.

"The lawyer said there'd be someone waitin' for me. Are you the man?" she asks, smiling. Her voice is strange with the alien music of a Gaelic accent, and her eyes—

Her eyes are green.

"Sorry, did I startle you?" she asks.

"No," he says, scrambling for control. He toggles the access latch to open the dockside passenger door; the car sways as she climbs inside. Hiroshima has worked for Churry-san for nearly a year, and never before does he remember driving anyone with green eyes. Such rare eyes, like jade, and red, red hair. . . . In the old legends, the demons always had red hair.

She slams the door. The windows that enclose the passenger compartment are electro-tinted. Hiro touches a keypad and the panes darken; from the outside they are gold-tinted mirrors, proof against the summer sun and prying eyes.

"Fancy car," Colleen Brennan says. He can feel the craft listing as she settles on the seat. Her voice sings out from the speaker on his console: "South dock, please."

"Hai," he responds automatically, and activates the car's security systems. A soft click is the only indication that the doors have been sealed against unwarranted entry—or exit. All too easy, he thinks. But then, hadn't he hoped it would be?

The console screen flickers and steadies to give him a live picture of the back seat. She is looking out the darkened window beside her, brows pinched together, her expression thoughtful. A hidden camera delivers this picture to him, as well as to a video storage system beneath the seat. The former is for the driver's security, the latter for Churry-san. After all his worry, the assistant director will enjoy seeing the end of the matter.

Hiroshima starts the engines. The interior of the hovercraft is soundproofed, reducing the roar of the fans to white noise. The canvas skirts billow out with a snap, and the car rises on a cushion of air. He steers away from the dock, bouncing across the wake left by a delivery-hover drawing into the boathouse farther down.

The red-haired, green-eyed woman grips the edge of the seat with both hands, swaying with the car's motion. She's humming a tune. Hiroshima doesn't know the words, but he remembers hearing the melody on the news. In the days since the disastrous performance on Boston Common, the song has become extremely popular with the city's slum dwellers.

Churry-san has sent memos prohibiting the song's being played anywhere on company property. Still, the music is everywhere, a song of revolution, like so many of Colleen Brennan's songs. Even now, hearing just a thread of the melody, Hiroshima can feel the power in it.

He draws in a slow breath and releases it, adjusts his course, and presses the second in a row of keys labeled "cabin ventilation." On the vid, Colleen Brennan's head jerks to the right, where the gas flows down from the ceiling, and she curses in a manner unfitting a young woman of respectful upbringing—which she is not, of course.

Hiroshima swings his eyes up to check his course, then glances down to the vid. She throws herself at the door, tries to wrench the handle up, but it resists her easily.

She coughs wetly and grabs for the briefcase, catching it up by the handle, she smashes it against the metal door. The exit holds firm, but the case pops open on impact, and its contents—documents, data disks, notebook—spill around the passenger compartment. She throws the case aside, turns, and tries to kick out the door, without success. Watching from the safety of the driver's compartment, Hiroshima notes that her actions are slowing. She's breathing too quickly, wasting herself with these useless attempts to escape.

She rubs her eyes, then freezes. Perhaps she's realized that the gas is something more insidious than mere stun-mist. Not for the first time is Hiro thankful that the passenger cabin can be made gas-tight, with an air supply completely separate from his own.

"Damn you, you let me out of here!" Colleen Brennan shouts, pounding on the window between the fore and aft compartments; the reinforced pane is so thick that he only hears this through the speakers. He checks his course across the harbor, looks back to the vid in time to see her cough into her hand. Blood spatters her open palm.

"God damn you, Churry!" she rages. Blood oozes down her chin, and she blinks and wipes her eyes, her mouth. "I know this is all your doing, you bastard!"

There's more, but her words are becoming difficult to understand, no matter the concentrated hate and outrage in her face. Blazing green eyes and flying red hair. . . . Almost, Hiro thinks, he might free her if she appealed to him directly.

Almost.

But he knows his duty, knows that his honor and ultimate success are linked with Churry's. He knows this must proceed.

She slumps back, and her slurred voice fades to nothing. As the car crosses a patch of wind-ruffled water, Colleen Brennan's body falls into the corner of the seat. Her head rests on her shoulder, eyes wide, lips glistening, as bright as her hair; blood shines wetly on her chin.

The nerve gas is efficient, but he'll probably need most of the afternoon to clean the compartment thoroughly. The upholstery must be spotless. Only then will he change clothes quickly for tonight's dinner meeting. Churry-san has a reservation at Four Seasons on the Bay and tickets to the opera afterward. The performance is a benefit, to raise funds for training programs similar to the one that brought Hiroshima to Boston.

He recalls his classes with pride. His tutors said he was a natural adept with the subliminal learning tapes. Colleen Brennan and

others like her have called such programs Pavlovian conditioning, but it's obvious how misinformed they are.

Hiro concentrates on steering across the currents where the lane crosses a South End factory flush. For a moment there is only the staticky hiss of the car's air cushion on the water. Then he notices another sound—singing?—coming from the compartment behind him.

His fingers fly across the controls, and the vid zooms in on her face. Her bloody lips are slightly parted, unmoving. He stabs more controls, his fingers shaking, increasing the volume, scanning for a source. The electronics add clarity, and he realizes it isn't *her* at all, no *shake*, but a man's voice, singing in a language he doesn't understand. The music is strange—Celtic, perhaps?—but with an angry maniacal beat that cannot be ignored. It comes from a stereo peg fallen from her car. He can see the head, just barely visible against the red hair caught under her cheek where she lies on the seat.

No *shake* then, merely a recording.

Hiroshima allows himself to breathe again and checks his course, focusing on the dock ahead. The minor lapse into superstition was surely due to his father. The old man was always trying to fill his head with fanciful stories. Hiro taps a finger absently in time to the edgy beat of the music. Wouldn't the old man's toes curl with joy at the opportunity awaiting his son tonight?

Hiroshima touches his shirt pocket to be sure the prize Churry-san gave him is still there: a ticket to tonight's performance of *Madame Butterfly*.

Unbidden memory flashes brittle and clear, and his hands clench on the steering bar.

"Listen to this," the old man said. "Listen! The *gaijin* who wrote this opera meant it to be Japanese. Ha! Does it sound very Japanese to you?"

"No," Hiro answered. "No, it is not like anything a Japanese might write. But, Father, is it not beautiful?"

"Ha," the old man admitted grudgingly. "For barbarian music, that is so. But I think you would do better."

There might be more to the memory, but it cuts off then, as the conditioning clears Hiroshima's mind of the treacherous thoughts. He draws a deep, shaky breath and sits up a little straighter. The car is closing on the docks. There's work to do.

WAITING at the dockhouse is Churry's team: a tall woman and a shorter man, both in dark brown coveralls. Hiroshima helps them with the body. They roll it into a slick black leatherette bag and drop it in the trunk of their auto. The woman wipes her hands on a rag, tosses it into the back, and slams the lid shut.

"Might as well throw that briefcase and stuff into the bay," the man says. "By the way, Mr. Churry wants to be picked up an hour earlier tonight."

"Certainly," Hiroshima says, nodding. He slips his hand into his pants pocket and watches them drive away with Colleen Brennan's body. The hard button of her stereo head rolls between his fingers. Water slaps the dock under him; the hovercar squeaks softly against rubber fenders. The music is still in his head, righteous beat pounding hard and strong as the current in the bay.

As if riding that current, the image of the old man washes through his mind. His father had begged him not to enter the indenturedship program, had assured him they would find the money for the music academy somehow. "I promised your mother, before the quake," the old man said. "And I promise you. I'll sell the fishing boat if I have to."

Foolish old man, breaking his back for no good reason. Coming home exhausted at night to lie on his futon and listen to *Madame Butterfly*.

"I did the right thing, Father," Hiroshima says aloud, as if it were possible for the old man to hear him now. "I earned enough to pay for your doctors and your funeral, enough to pay the priests to say prayers for you every day for a hundred years!"

But now Colleen Brennan's music is louder, and the old man is standing there on the dock beside him like an elder dragon, ancient and scowling, an enormous clawed and scaled *shake* smoke-tangled and gray with disappointment.

"Go away!" Hiroshima tells him. "It's not important, see?"

He draws the stereo head from his pocket and casts the music into the water. The ripples of its passage are quickly lost in the current.

For a heartbeat the dragon-smoke drifts in plumed ribbons thick enough to choke him. Then the *shake* fades, softly burning, like the last drop from a cup of sake. Hiroshima shudders.

"Rest, old man," he whispers, his voice shaking, but he has it back under control immediately. "Rest now, and let me get back to work."

After all, there's still the upholstery to be cleaned.

He touches the ticket in his pocket once again, allowing himself to feel pride and no little anticipation, and he sighs. *Madame Butterfly*. . . Oh, but he loves the music, especially the aria in the final scene. Sometimes the tragedy of it touches him so deeply, he wants to cry. ☘



about the author

Charlene Bruno has worked as an archaeologist, an astronomer, a baker, an editor, a museum curator's assistant, a janitor, tutor, physicist, and a scientific programmer. Her first professional sale, "The

Salute," published in the Spring 1996 issue of *Aboriginal SF*, was recommended for a Nebula Award. Her recent publications include the short story "Absolute Eyes," which appears in issue 42 of Marion Zimmer Bradley's *Fantasy Magazine*.

Bruno also writes for several magazines, including *Aboriginal SF*, *Publishers Weekly*, *InQuest Gamer*, and *Brutarian*. She has just finished her first SF novel.

about the illustrator

J.J. Abbott is founder and creative director of *Brimstone*, a full-service graphics and illustrations agency. Now in its sixth year, *Brimstone* illustrates and designs consumer products for entertainment-based corporations, including work for VHS, CD, CD-ROM, DVD, toys, children's books, licensed products, comic books, and trading cards. J.J. Abbott is a Phi Beta Kappa graduate of the University of Michigan.





LUNA INCOGNITA

A lesson for Eighteenth, and for us all: There's more to learning than just waiting to be told.

BY MARY SOON LEE

Be respectful, the elders told me over and over again on the long journey to Earth's moon. *Be courageous*, they said, and I twitched my antennae in assent, wishing the elders would explain what dangers lay ahead, but they did not elaborate. Perhaps even the elders were unsure: I would be the first of the People to study at a human university.

Ever since I'd been selected, I had found it hard to sleep. I would lie awake, surrounded by the sleep-rustlings of my fellow hatchlings, going over the day's lessons in my mind, hoping I would perform creditably when faced with human teachers. Of course I was proud of being chosen, but my pride shrank to a small, sad thing against my fear of disappointing the elders.

Learn well and bring honor to your gene-line, the elders said when the ship finally docked. I twitched my antennae and crawled through the airlock. It cycled shut behind me, like an eye closing.

I paused at the top of the ramp, sniffing. The air smelled empty. For the first time in my life, I couldn't scent any others of my kind.

A rumbling cry came from the bottom of the ramp, and the translator looped around my neck said "Hurry up!"

A bright orange human stood waiting

down below. The elders had shown me diagrams of humans, but it made my stomachs churn to see one so close. The human was about my length, but it had only four limbs, and it held itself vertical.

The orange human's upper limbs waved in a dance. "Can you understand me? Come down here."

"I understand and obey." The translator growled out the human words as I spoke. *Too heavy*, my legs grumbled at me, but I had exercised diligently on the ship in preparation for the higher gravity. Ignoring my legs' complaints, I ordered *Full speed!* and crawled down the ramp.

"Hello there. I'm Kurte Carlsson. I'm a sophomore, biology major. You're running late, and admin says you haven't even picked your courses yet."

Shame and confusion flooded me. I had thought seven hours remained before the first lecture, but I must have misunderstood. To have made a mistake before teaching even began! I lowered my front segments to the ground. "Abject apologies. I await punishment."

"Uh, that's okay. With luck I can rush you through the admissions process in time, but lectures start this afternoon.

It's going to be tight. Follow me." The human Carlsson bounded over to a doorway.

ILLUSTRATION BY
RON SPEARS

I crawled at full speed, but Carlsson's arms were doing their warring dance by the time I reached the doorway. Through the opening, I saw a moving metal floor-strip, laden with boxes. A second human, this one a pale blue color, typed at a computer. After a moment I realized that the blue color was a wrapper, not part of the human at all. I looked at Carlsson: Yes, the bright orange was also a wrapper.

"This is Ms. Rochon," said Carlsson, gesturing at the second human. "She's in charge of immigration."

She made a note that the Ms. Rochon human was a female.

Ms. Rochon bared her teeth to me. "Welcome to Luna. Your entry has been preapproved, and since there are no known mutually contagious diseases between our species, this won't take a moment. What do you have to declare?"

A test—I should have anticipated this, should have prepared a speech. The honor not only of my gene-line, but of our whole species, rested on my segments. The elders should have picked a more worthy hatchling. I stumbled for words. "Deep regret for my late arrival. Greatly do I appreciate the chance to learn from human elders. Thank you. I will study as hard as I can."

Ms. Rochon covered her mouth with her hand, making an odd sound that the translator ignored. "I'm sure you will, but that wasn't quite what I meant. Did you bring anything with you from your ship?"

"My translator." I tapped it.

"Anything else?"

"No. Unless . . . My elders said they had already delivered my food processor and that they gave water for my tuition fee."

"And so they did." Ms. Rochon looked at Carlsson. "I've never seen a ship ferry so much water. There must have been enough to fill the Mare Crisium."

I had studied the Earth's moon, and I knew that the water shipment would fill scarcely one tenth of the feature referred to, but I knew better than to correct an elder.

"Since you have no luggage, let me just scan you, and then you can go with Kurre. He'll take you to your tutor."

He looked from Ms. Rochon to Carlsson, but their wrappers hid most of their bodies. I wouldn't have been able to guess which was the male and which the female.

Ms. Rochon walked over to a gray arch on one side of the room. She pressed a button, and the arch made a terrible low-frequency grinding noise as if it were chewing on bones. "Please walk through the scanner."

I ordered my legs forward, but they refused to obey. I remembered horror stories whispered in the canteen, the hundred ways an alien could kill. Evidently my legs remembered too. *Be sensible, I commanded my legs. Humans have never hurt the People. Forward!*

Still my legs refused to obey. Though they grumbled occasionally, as legs will, they hadn't disobeyed a direct command since I was newly hatched. *Be brave, I told them. The honor of the People depends on you.*

At last my legs edged forward. They crept over to the terrible grinding sound of the gray arch, hesitated, then plunged

through. I checked myself over: no apparent damage. But though the human atmosphere held all the elemental gases I needed, still I tasted the emptiness in it once more. I thought of how many rotations of this strange moon must pass before I could see my fellow hatchlings again, of how ashamed I would be if I failed them. But we were of the same hatchling; they would welcome me back into the sleep cluster no matter how poorly I performed.

"Excellent. You're cleared for Luna. Enjoy your stay," Ms. Rochon pressed the button on the arch, and the terrible grinding noise stopped.

"Gratitude to the honored elder."

"You're welcome." Ms. Rochon bared her teeth again.

"Okay, let's go. Time's a-wasting," Carlsson bounded over to the door.

I crawled after him at full speed, but by the time I reached the door, Carlsson was far down the corridor.

He ran back to me. "Can you go any faster?"

"Regrettably not. I fill with dismay to cause further inconvenience."

"Never mind." Carlsson matched my pace. "It gives us a chance to chat. So what are you called? It sounds crazy, but I couldn't find your name in your records."

"I am the eighteenth-hatched of the clutch of Theorem Prover by Boldness-in-the-Hunt." I paused. Carlsson had clearly earned a name despite his youth, and that made it harder to admit that I still lacked one. "The elders have not yet granted me a personal name."

"Is it okay if I call you Eighteenth?"

"I would be honored." None but my fellow hatchlings had given me a use-name before this. My breathing chamber swelled to capacity. "Thank you."

"So which courses are you taking?"

"I do not know. My study-time is at the discretion of the elders." Human Carlsson had called himself a sophomore, a second-level student. That meant he was senior to me, but not an elder. As such I dared to add, "I await the selection of my courses with considerable interest."

"I bet you do," Carlsson rubbed at his face. "I think you're going to find the, uh, human elders organize things a little differently than you're used to. They'll probably let you study whatever interests you."

I thought I must have misheard, but when I queried the translator, it repeated Carlsson's statement. To be entrusted to direct my own learning—that was an honor I had never anticipated. I tried to stay calm: Carlsson had only said the elders would *probably* let me choose. But if they did—oh, what a delicious flavor that would be!

Geometry and topology, sprinkled with a little number theory, and then to leaven the abstract with the concrete—and to take better advantage of the opportunity given to me—perhaps courses in human biology and human culture. For the first time, I looked forward to the human university not because of the honor it represented, but because of all the rich flavors of learning I could absorb. There were so many things I yearned to know, and if I crouched quietly and patiently, the teachers would tell me the answers.



Carlsson described the available courses as we threaded our way through the tall corridors. Even my legs were so excited that they offered no complaints about our fast pace or the high gravity.

Carlsson led me into an office.

Seg! said my legs as they sank into a strange furry skin lying on the ground.

A human in a yellow and white striped wrapper stood up as we entered. "Aah, Kame, I'm glad to see you found our lost soul." The human extended an upper limb toward me, then dropped it after a short pause. "A pleasure to meet you. I'm Dr. Moseley, your mentor."

"Honored mentor." I twitched my antennae to show respectful attention.

"Well now, let's get the mundanities out of the way first, shall we? Why don't you begin by completing the admissions form?" Dr. Moseley pointed at a computer resting high up on a corner-table. "We ordered translation software and a special entry-pad. Let me know when you're finished."

Dr. Moseley turned away and began a discussion with Carlsson.

I crawled over to the corner-table, but the computer was too high up for me to reach. This must be the first test from my mentor. A second smaller table stood nearby. Perhaps if I climbed onto the second table, I could reach the computer. The table looked too narrow to balance on safely, but I saw that Carlsson had folded himself onto a similar object. Perhaps it was more stable than it appeared.

I pushed the second table over to the table with the computer. By balancing on my back legs, I managed to grasp the edge of the shorter table. My legs hauled themselves onto it, one by one, but there wasn't enough room for my last four legs. In the unfamiliar gravity, I scrambled for purchase.

Unstable! warned my legs, but too late. The table toppled forward, and I toppled with it. Flailing for support, I caught the edge of the computer-table, and it fell after us, the computer crashing down beside me.

I buried my head in the soft floor skin: disaster. I had failed the test. The humans would send me away from the university.

I heard footsteps approaching, but I could not look up. To have glimpsed the feast of learning that opened before me, and then to see it vanish in an instant's clumsiness: I could not bear it. I could not speak.

"Eighteenth, are you all right?" Carlsson's voice.

"Yes," I muttered into the floor. The soft floor skin had protected me from physical injury, but the weight of my disgrace was worse by far.

"Thank God!" Dr. Moseley's voice. "Why didn't you ask us to put the computer on the floor for you?"

"You are an elder. My duty is to obey you, and through obedience to learn. Abject and sorrowing apologies for my failure—"

"No," said Dr. Moseley. "The fault was mine. I was thoughtless and inconsiderate. Please forgive me. But next time you run into difficulty, ask for help. Agreed?"

Slowly I raised my head. I pivoted one eye to look at Dr. Moseley. "But you are an elder. I cannot interrupt you."

"Yes, you can. I'm here to help you. Any questions?"



I had never heard of such an idea: that a juvenile could question an elder, that an elder would encourage a juvenile in such behavior. The notion was intoxicating. Cautiously I ventured a half-question. "It is permitted for me to ask you something."

"Always," said Dr. Moseley. "Ask away."

"Then, despite my failings, is it possible, might I be allowed to continue at the university?"

"Yes, indeed, you may. Is there anything else you were wondering?"

So very many questions to choose from. I fought for calm. "Given a compass and a straight edge, can one construct a square and a circle of equal area? If so, how? If not, is there a counterproof?"

Dr. Moseley looked at Carlsson. "I'm afraid my expertise lies in geology, not geometry, but perhaps you would like to take some mathematics classes."

"Yes, oh yes, and thank you."

And that is why I am named Questioner. For though I learned many other things at the human university, none were as extraordinary and wonderful as the asking of questions. And I cannot shake the belief—may the elders forgive me—that this is a habit all the People should practice, no matter how young.

Does anyone have any questions? 🐉



about the author

Mary Soan Let grew up in London and now resides in Pittsburgh, where she splits her time between computer programming and writing. She has had thirty-eight stories published in science fiction magazines, and has a short story forthcoming in the Year's Best SF #4 anthology, edited by David Hartwell.



about the illustrator

Ron Spears has done work for Magic: The Gathering cards, ads, and posters, created 3D worlds for four PC games, illustrated the Gabriel Knight graphic novel, and dreams of painting on the open range. He lives in Seattle, Washington, with his wife, dog, and cowboy hat.

Amazing facts

THIS JUNE 1949 *AMAZING* Stories cover, according to editor Raymond A. Palmer, was "rather loosely" based on an Alexander Blade story called "Dynasty of the Devil." The true identity of the author "Alexander Blade" is not known, since this was one of several house names used by a bandful of authors.

Palmer said he allotted Arnold Kohn, the cover's illustrator, some artistic leeway. "You won't find the girl on the cover galloping around on horseback [in 'Dynasty of the Devil']," Kohn said. But the cover girl on the opposite page is in the story. Her name was "Janet" for the first half of the story and "Janis" for the rest. Could it be that the magazine, in those days, had even fewer proofreaders than it did writers?

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Frame of Reference



▼ BUT IMITATES LIFE?

The front cover of the June 1938 issue has a photograph of a scene that could have been taken straight out of a science-fiction movie of the day—instead (in strange behavior) carries helpful baggage back to his ship with the aid of rope-ladder technology.



The back cover of the June 1938 issue of *AMAZING STORIES* contained this interesting astronomy lesson—in a “universe” consisting of our solar system plus an unnamed “nearest star,” it would take the world’s fastest airplane one heck of a long time to reach any of the other planets (but a mere eighteen days to get to the Moon!).

Sixty years ago, it was apparently impossible to imagine any realistic form of travel faster than a propeller-driven plane. Today, our frame of reference is considerably different because we know, from experience, how long it takes a rocket-launched probe to cross the distance between Earth and its neighbors. The *Mariner* probes aimed at Mars have made the trip in five or six months; the recent *Pioneer* mission actually took a little longer, about seven months. Venus is only about four months away. *Pioneer 10* traveled from Earth to Jupiter in a year and nine months—but it was almost ten years later before that same probe crossed the orbit of Pluto. Even at speeds that we now think of as ordinary, the “universe” is still a pretty big place.



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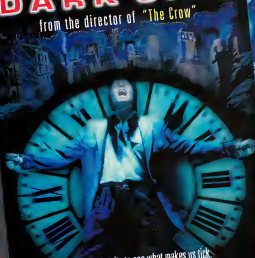
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